

A Lancer Original

STUART JASON
the blazing sequel to
BLACK LORD

Born to rule, the slave called Royal challenged
a white world to prove his manhood!

BLACK MASTER



Black Master

Stuart Jason

LANCER BOOKS



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PROLOGUE

Royal crouched in the undergrowth at the edge of the live oak forest, hunger grinding his vitals. He had been watching the shanty-house of the poor-white couple for an hour, cautious about going to it until he could be reasonably sure such a move would be safe.

Now, spying two white horsemen turning from the big road into the long lane to the shanty, he dropped flat on his belly, rifle at his side, and peered through the dusty leaves of some fruitless hackberry bushes. Sweat crawled under his fine, tailored suit and sent his musk into the late August heat. Back in the forest, the horse he'd bought from the poor-white three days ago, fluttered its nostrils.

Royal's heart surged. He wondered, in sudden alarm, if the small breeze would carry his musk to the white horsemen and whether it would carry the sounds from his horse. Heartbeat drumming against the dry and dusty ground, hunger a pain in him, he watched while the horsemen walked their mounts up the lane, while they reined in at the shanty and dismounted. He watched them talk to the poor-white man and go into the shanty-house with him.

He was still watching when a third horseman turned into the lane and galloped swiftly up, raising a cloud of dust. This was Lee Hunnicutt, owner of Hunnicutt Hill, the famed Louisiana slave-breeding plantation, the angry, vengeful master who was offering a ten thousand dollar reward for Royal's capture.

The mammoth, six-foot-seven-inch Mandingo slave thought now of his cache of gold, buried back in the forest. Hunnicutt's beautiful cousin Lida, his poor-white

cousin now dead, had dug up this gold and given it to Royal, telling him it amounted to forty-seven thousand dollars. And Royal would give it all, if need be, to the man who would guarantee him passage to a northern state where he would be free.

He'd meant to offer gold to the poor-white who lived in that shanty. But could he trust the man, now that he was talking to Lee Hunnicutt? Would the fellow take Royal's gold, vowing to help him, then turn him over to Hunnicutt and collect the reward?

And Royal knew, too, that any blacks he might go to for help were no better off than he—chattel slaves of wealthy, grasping plantation owners, totally unable to do anything for him. But he had to do something, and fast, for the hunt would start relentlessly now that Hunnicutt himself was on the scene.

At this very moment the white master was surely learning that only three days ago a black answering Royal's description had bought a horse and a jug of whiskey from the poor-white! Royal rested his chin on his crossed arms and kept his gaze on the shanty-house. After the master and the other two horsemen had left, he would make his move as he had planned. It was still his best chance.

CHAPTER ONE

Zeb Sproul glowered at his white wife and her octo-roon daughters. He shook his head angrily at her reluctance to make the girls pretty so he could show them at their best when the two white gentlemen riding up the lane arrived.

"Ye got no say, Mercy," he growled. "Them white gent'men's the fu'st has come ridin' to my door since them bastid wenches of yer'n has growed tits. An' here it is, 1852 a'ready! I aim to sell 'em off fu'st chanct I git—y've knowed that ever since I took pity on ye an' married ye in spite of yer fu'st nigger bastid an' in spite of yer second nigger bastid ye had in yer belly—an' this may be my chanct to sell 'em. Go git 'em the dresses I brang fun Noo Orleens yestiday! Go on, woman, afore I takes my fist to ye!"

Mercy turned from where she stood inside the kitchen door, not because she was afraid of her husband, but because he'd never let up until she did what he wanted. She followed her daughters across the puncheon floor into the other room where all five children, the two octo-roon girls and the three boys she had borne Sproul, slept. She and Sproul bedded in the kitchen.

"Ye boys, git!" she heard her husband order. "Git down to the creek an' ketch some fish fer supper! Git out fum underfoot, hear? An' Mercy," he ordered, raising his voice, "fix yerse'f up, too! Let the gent'men see the mammy of them wenches ain' no ugly ol' crone, hear?"

"I hear," Mercy called back.

She opened the clothes cupboard which, with room to spare, held all the clothes for their family of seven. The

three new calico dresses lay neatly folded on the middle shelf, in the place of honor.

"Suzan," she said to her first-born, who was fifteen, "I reckon the scarlet is fer you, yer eyes so black an' shinin', they'll set each other off. And the gold fer you, Noele," she said to her next-born, who was fourteen, "yer eyes bein' brown an' as glistenin' as the heart of a flower."

"You goin' ter have the blue dress, Ma?" asked Suzan in her sun-warmed voice which was so like that of Tintin, her father, that sometimes, even now, with him gone from her life these almost fifteen years, it made Mercy's pulse go hot for an instant. "To match yer eyes, Ma?"

"I reckon," Mercy admitted, "though my fu'st thought is fer what's purtiest fer you girls. Any color's purty on you but since I got to make you purty for the gent'men anyhow, I'd ruther you was yer very purtiest."

"So's they'll buy us, Ma?" asked Suzan.

"So's they'll set store by you and be good to you if they buys you," Mercy said. "Shuck down, now. We mustn't keep yer Pa waitin'."

"If he 'us really our blood-Pa," Noele asked half-saucily, as was her habit despite Zeb's angry shouts and Mercy's worried admonitions, "if you 'us a octoroon too, would he sell us off then, Ma? Or would he fin' husbands fer us?"

"Hush yer mouth!" Mercy cried softly. "Shuck off them shifts an' wash up! Yer Pa's bin good to you! He took you in when he married me, an' you've had the same grub as him an' yer little white brothers! An' he ain't never messed aroun' with you . . . not yer titties, even! Tell me that ain't a good man . . . takin' in black blood an' raisin' it good as his own!"

She watched as, subdued, they peeled off their old shifts, revealing their young, up-tilted breasts. She eyed the sweet curve of their waists, the gentle, nubile surge of hip, the smooth flow of thigh and leg and slender ankle. They were enough to set any man wild with desire.

As she had done—ah, as she had done with Tintin,

their handsome quadroon father! And, until this day, with Zeb Sproul, her husband.

She stripped off her own faded shift, feeling the lift of her full, firm breasts as they sprang free and wild, nipples erect. She ran her hands along the curve of her own waist, aware of the provocative thrust of hip and flow of thigh. Someday her daughters would be in this same full bloom, throbbing and pulsing with desires of their own.

She slipped into her blue calico, luxurating in the feel of new cloth, the first she'd had since she married. Until now she'd worn only hand-me-downs which Sproul cadged here and there. She held the red calico for Suzan, then the gold for Noele, and watched them dance excitedly about the room, stroking the new material and squealing. These were the only new dresses they'd ever had.

While they tugged and patted at their calicoes, Mercy stepped to the triangle of mirror on the wall. She ran the wide-toothed comb through her tawny hair, which was cut jaw-length because Sproul wanted it that way. It swung free and vibrant about her earthy face, framing the pleasantly rounded features and full red lips.

She was no slattern now, she thought. For the first time since Tintin held her in his arms, she looked like a woman! Except, of course, at night when she slept nude, the way Sproul wanted.

Suddenly her daughters crowded in so that the mirror held all three faces. Mercy's skin was milk-white; theirs was touched with gold. Their hair, worn longer than hers, was tawny also but darker and fell in great, deep waves and gentle, big curls. Their brows arched like hers, black instead of brown. Their features were a blend of her brow and cheekbones and mouth, and the aquiline, non-Negroid nose of Tintin, their sire.

Tintin had been a house slave on the Mississippi cotton plantation where Mercy's father was overseer. Pa had raged and threatened to throw her out when he learned she was knocked-up. And when he discovered

that his fourteen-year-old daughter had been knocked-up by a quadroon slave, he beat her and called upon her dead mother to witness the travail she had brought upon him by dying ahead of her time.

As for Tintin, he'd been whipped forty lashes and locked in the plantation jail for thirty days and all but sold downriver. Some masters would have killed him for laying hand on a white girl but Tintin escaped death partly because the white mistress interceded and partly because he was worth so much gold it would be madness to kill him.

But when Mercy, headstrong and wildly in love with the handsome, golden-skinned Tintin, slipped again into his arms as soon as he was out of jail and was again knocked-up, her Pa would have no more of her. He hunted himself up a penniless white man, Zeb Sproul, and paid him to marry his daughter and take her clean out of Mississippi to Louisiana.

And here she had been ever since.

Zeb had told her on their wedding day and at length, that he would sell her suckers, the one in her arms and the one in her belly, as quick as they reached an age where they'd bring him a profit. And now that day was here.

Leaving the girls at the mirror, Mercy went into the kitchen and looked out the door. Her husband was still waiting for the slow-moving horsemen, who were only two-thirds of the way up the lane.

Sproul was a thin man of forty. He had dirt-colored hair and eyes and dirt-colored clothes that no amount of scrubbing and pounding on stones down by the creek ever changed. His features were nondescript but his eyes were keen.

He glanced Mercy over. "Ye take keer 'roun' these gent'men," he warned. "See they don' paw ye, just 'cause ye got new clo'es. Ye don' look nowhere's yer age . . . ye don' look no thu'ty. I'd have ye take that dress off an' put on the ol' one but I aim to drive me a bargain. These

gent'men see I dress the wimminfolks good, they not be as apt to try an' cheat me when I put my price on the wenches."

"They looks awful purty," Mercy said. "If things was diffrent, they could have husbands like their Ma's got."

Sproul grunted. "Things is what they be, not no other way."

"If you was their Pa," Mercy asked daringly, her heart moving, "would you sell them off?"

Sproul faltered and stammered, then began to shout. "Them wenches is niggers!" he stormed. "They got nigger blood!"

"What little they got don't show," Mercy said doggedly, risking all now that she'd already gone too far. "They don't look no different than white girls. They could pass fer white, jest as easy as nothin'!"

"They's my chattels!" Sproul yelled. "Even if they has jus' one drop of nigger blood, they's still niggers! An' I got a right to sell 'em!"

Mercy turned away, letting none of her pain show on her face. Only when she went into the other room and ran the comb through Suzan's hair and then Noele's, did she betray her feelings by stroking their hair and giving each a tender kiss on the cheek."

"Git 'em ready to bring out when I say!" Sproul shouted from the yard. "Them gent'men might de-cide they's in the wrong place an' ride off unless'n they see them wenches the minnit I de-cide!"

Mercy gave Suzan's hair an extra stroke, cupped Noele's cheek briefly, hugged them both, then said, "Now, do as yer Pa says, hear?"

"Yes, Ma," both girls agreed. But Noele's eyes flashed, and her stubborn chin firmed. "He ain't our Pa—he says so all the time! An' I'm just as glad he ain't! Him sellin' us away f'um our Ma and her a white woman, white as he is hisse'f!"

"Hush, oh hush!" Mercy cautioned, unable at this moment to make her voice sharp.

Irvin Wood and Hosea Derrick, the two horsemen who had been walking their mounts up the seemingly endless lane, were sweating under the wet-hot August sun. They reined up a few steps from the poor-white standing outside his shanty-house, peering at them with sharp eyes.

"How-do, gent'men!" the fellow greeted them. "Ye want some good cold spring water to drink?"

Hosea Derrick took off his old, wide-brimmed felt hat and mopped his sweating brow with his kerchief. He ignored the poor-white and glanced meaningfully at Wood, who gave a small nod. At this, Derrick looked at Sproul and asked, "Mister Lee Hunnicutt bin here?"

"Fum Hunnicutt Hill?" gasped the poor-white, a big smile taking his face. "Mister Hunnicutt comin' to my place? W'y that's the finest thing happen to me in a y'ar! Is you gent'men frien's of Mister Hunnicutt? 'Cause if ye be, that the finest recommendation ye kin givel I'm Zeb Sproul, gent'men. I'll call my woman to fetch that water."

He turned and shouted. "Mercy, fetch these gent'men a pitcher that cold water! They powerful thirstyl!" He paused, looked at Wood, who was about his own age and red-haired, then at Derrick, who was perhaps five years older and going bald. "Light off'n them hosses, gent'men . . . let 'em water fum the trough yonder!"

The men alit as Mercy came out, carrying a wood-chip tray with an earthenware pitcher and two mugs on it. She set the tray on a tree stump, poured the water and handed the mugs to the men without a glance, then went back into the house, her bare feet noiseless on the hard-packed earth.

"Tell the wenches to be ready," Sproul called after her.

Wood refilled his mug and drained it. "Tasted good, Sproul, that bein' yer name," he said. "Thank ye, suh."

"Pleasures me, gent'men," said Sproul. "Any frien' of Mister Lee Hunnicutt gits the best I got. I'll jus' lead yer hosses to the trough."

Since they didn't object, he picked up the reins and led the horses to water, where he left them drinking, and

came hurrying back. "I'm cur'ous, gent'men," he said, "as to why Mister Lee Hunnicutt's comin' to my place."

Wood glared at Sproul, then looked pointedly at Derrick. Derrick swiped the back of his hand across his wet mouth and demanded, "Why you askin' questions, Sproul?"

"W'y, I ain't aimin' to put my nose into Mister Hunnicutt's bizness," Sproul said, "but if he comin' to my place, it ain't but natural I should wonder why he's comin', is it?"

The red-haired Wood kept looking at Derrick as he spoke. "I think he is stickin' his nose into Mister Lee Hunnicutt's private bizness, no matter whose place he comin' to," he said.

"That right," Derrick agreed, hooking his thumbs into his trouser belt. "I don't think Mister Hunnicutt goin' to 'preciate it one bit when we'uns tells him 'bout how curious Mister Sproul has got of a sudden. I think Mister Hunnicutt is goin' to git killin' mad, that temper he got, an' mad as he is a'ready."

Sproul began to shake. "Gent'men," he protested, "don' understan' me wrong, p-please! I don' mean no harm of no kind! I was jus' wonderin' what would bring Mister Lee Hunnicutt, him a fine, big rich gent'man, to my placel" He paused, stared at both men's water mugs, saw they were empty, and was stricken by an idea. "How 'bout some whiskey of my own brewin', gent'men?" he asked. "You jus' come into my kitchen here an' set at my board, an' my woman'll fetch you a cold jug fum the spring!"

Mollified by Sproul's hospitality, the men followed him into the kitchen, which was surprisingly cool from the way the breeze filtered through the whole shanty. The woman scuttled out the door; from the next room came sounds that told of the presence of others.

"What's the news fum Noo Orleans, gent'men?" asked Sproul, making conversation.

"They's never nothin' but news in N'Orleans," said Derrick. "Break a man's tongue in two to try to tell it.

We met up with Mister Hunnicutt in N'Orleans," he said. "He offered us a bizness prop'sition an' told us to meet him at the fu'st shanty house where they ain't no more swamp or hidin' places. Jumpin'-off place, he called it." He turned suddenly to Wood. "You reckon we hit the right place? Reckon we should ride on an' see. Reckon we got the right shanty-house?"

"Oh, ye got the right one!" Sproul declared. "Ain't no other fer four-five miles. This the jumpin'-off place, an' that's fer sure! What kin' of biz'ness prop'sition, Mister Hunnicutt make ye?" he asked bluntly, peering suddenly into Hosea Derrick's face.

"That's none of yer biz'ness!" cried Wood. He moved his hand to a hump under his shirt. Derrick grabbed Wood's wrist warningly, but Wood's hand remained where it was.

The tension broke when the woman came in from outside and set the beaded, cold jug on the bare table. She brought the same two mugs, along with a third one for her husband, filled them all to the brim, then retired to a far corner and began to knead some bread dough.

Sproul sat down at the table with his guests. They all lifted their mugs, drank deeply, draining every drop.

Derrick wiped the back of his hand across his mouth, lifted the jug and poured another round. "This brew jus' about savin' yer life, Sproul," he said. "It like to make us fergit you 'us nosin' into our private biz'ness prop'sition."

Sproul steadied his mug in both hands. "No 'fense meant, gent'men," he insisted, "none a-tall!"

Wood snarled, "Pokin' into men's private biz'ness prop'sitions ain't safe. It git you kilt one these days when you ain't got a jug handy to save yer life."

A sharp, crisp voice stabbed from the doorway. "What ain' safe?" it demanded.

It was Lee Hunnicutt, tall and thin, keen and aware, not yet thirty. His brown hair was as smooth as though it had just been combed and slicked; his sharp features and beak-like nose looked as cold as ice.

At that moment Mercy turned, bread dough clinging

to her hands, tawny hair swinging. The sudden movement caught his attention and he whirled toward her. "Who are you?" he whispered, "who the gaw-damned hell are you, anyhow?"

CHAPTER TWO

For a flash there, Hunnicutt actually thought the woman was his white-trash cousin Lida, the only woman with whom he'd ever found true sexual release, come back from the dead.

Instantly he knew better. Lida had been killed three nights ago, back at Hunnicutt Hill. It was the night Lee and his plantation owner friends had almost captured Royal, the big Mandingo buck he was now trailing.

He took another look at the shanty-woman, who was staring back at him, a keen look this time. She didn't exactly resemble Lida, after all. The first glance resemblance was due to an impression created by her tawny hair and full, tantalizing figure. Even so, Hunnicutt felt his manhood grow and yearn, and he wondered if this shanty-woman, like Lida, could satisfy him.

"That my wife, suh," said the poor-white, who had shot up from the table. "That Miz Zeb Sproul. You Mister Lee Hunnicutt, suh?"

Lee nodded sharply, his eyes cutting over the woman's figure. He noted the pink flush mounting her neck, suffusing her face. The flush added warmth to his desire. He would have this woman before he left the barren little farm; somehow, he would have her.

"Set down, Mister Hunnicutt, suh," urged Sproul. "Do me the honor and set with these gent'men an' sample my whiskey!"

"I nevah drink spirits when I've got something impoh-tant to do," Hunnicutt said shortly. He stabbed a look at the red-haired Wood. "What you arguin' with this fellah 'bout?" he demanded.

"He was pryin' into our biz'ness," Wood replied, "tryin'

to find out why we's meetin' you here. I had to git sharp with him to git him to shet up."

Hunnicuttt turned on Sproul. "That true?" he asked. "You pryin' into the biz'ness of a Hunnicutt? Tell me is that true, an' if it's true, why you'd do such a thing. Jus' tell me that, Mistah Zeb Sproul!"

"No, suh . . . it wan't like that!" moaned Sproul, suddenly cringing, his nondescript face twisting in alarm. "These gent'men misunderstood! All I got on my min' is to extend my hospitality ter all three of you gent'men, suh!"

He turned fiercely on his wife. "Where-at's Suzan an' Noele?" he demanded, his voice high and spiteful. "Why ain't they out here servin' these fine gent'men? Git 'em in her right now, woman . . . step lively an' step fast or ye'll git the back of my hand in yer mouth!"

It occurred to Hunnicutt that nearly any wife would at least flash a resentful look at her husband upon being spoken to so harshly before strangers but this woman did no such thing. The flush on her face deepening, she stepped to an inner door and spoke in a low voice.

"Girls," she said, "come into the kitchen."

The very tone of her voice whetted Hunnicutt's urge to bed her. Standing in the doorway as she was, light from the outside door and from windows within the other room, flowed through her blue dress so that he could see her legs all the way to where they joined her body. They were shapely and exciting and more enticing than any legs he had ever seen, nude or clothed. His mind began to dart, seeking a way to claim her.

Now she stood away from the door and two young girls came shyly into the kitchen. Lee felt his eyes widen until the eyeballs smarted, felt the strengthening of lust. Both girls were as nubile as Lida herself had been when she was their age! And they reminded him of Lida even more strongly than did the Sproul woman, with their tawnniness and earthy appeal.

Somehow, he didn't give a damn how, he had to have these girls! Give him these and he was certain he could

find the satisfaction he'd found with Lida. And with Belle, the madam of Belle's Pleasure Palace in New Orleans. He sure as hell needed these girls, because his Yankee bride was no good to him in bed, Lida was dead and buried, and Belle made him give her anything from carved mahogany furniture to emerald earrings in exchange for one night in her arms.

Because he was determined to have the girls, he deliberately let a bit of warmth come into his manner as he turned once more to Sproul. "Reckon I will jus' sit at youah table an' have a drop of that whiskey, aftah all," he said. "'Specially if two such beauties as youah daughtahs are goin' to poah the whiskey foah me."

"They goin' to pour!" Sproul assured him. "They trained! My wife—she's they Ma—she's trained 'em all kinds of ways, suh! You jes' set down an' watch an' see fer yerse'f!"

Hunnicutt observed the tender-fleshed girls as they moved about the table, his sex was going so hot he heard himself saying warmly to Sproul, "Youah a fohtunate man to have such comely daughtahs." Inwardly he marveled that this nondescript, inferior creature could have sired them, though it was plain to see, looking at their mother, where they got at least part of their beauty.

"They ain' my 'git', suh," Sproul said, managing to sound both indignant and subservient. "They my wife's wenches. She's white but they's niggers. They ain' white at all . . . they's octoroons."

Hunnicutt's blood pulsed. What good fortune . . . what an opportunity! He eyed the wenches, marveling. Only the curl to their hair and their dark eyes could possibly hint at the black blood. And these two things weren't enough to betray it, not even with the gold in the skin added. Many a white girl Hunnicutt knew was thus endowed, though not with such beauty, never with such beauty. Perhaps, he thought, the beauty was what betrayed the black drop. They were definitely of the placee class—the young octoroon wenches trained by their mothers to please one white man who would become

protector for the girl's lifetime. Each placee was kept, thus, as an almost-legal mistress by her one white man.

And these two young beauties were Lee Hunnicutt's for the buying! And he meant to buy them, no matter what the price, what the obstacle.

He watched as they carefully poured the whiskey, moving gracefully, spilling none, filling each mug exactly to the same mark as the last mug. "I'm in the mahket foah breedahs," he said, making his tone casual. "What you take foah these two?"

Sproul scratched in his hair, studied his wife, then the wenches, as though comparing their qualities.

Hunnicutt added quickly. "I want virgins."

"These never bin busted," Sproul assured him. "Shuck down, you Suzan, you Noele. Let the gent'man 'zamine ye."

The girls stared at their mother. She waited a moment, nodded. Slowly then, their uncertainty and shyness demonstrating that they had never before done this, they took off their dresses and stood nude.

The very fact that they had never before even been viewed, made them doubly exciting to Hunnicutt. And when he saw their gentle, lovely bodies, he sucked in his breath. On either side of him, Wood and Derrick gulped in their breaths loudly.

His male organ throbbing, Hunnicutt pulled the older girl, Suzan, to stand between his knees. He handled first one small but fully-formed and up-tilted breast, then the other, stroking the nipples, watching them lift. He ran his hands down her sides, along the slender waist, around the gently surging hips, down the smooth, tender inner thighs, ran one finger into her vagina to test her virginity. He stroked her sex bud and got instant response. He stroked again and she moved, gasping as if in surprised wonder. He had all he could do to conceal and control his tumescence so Sproul would not know how determined he was to buy the wenches.

After a cursory examination of Suzan's teeth, he pushed her away and motioned Noele to stand between

his knees. He repeated the examination, savoring the texture of young flesh, lingering over the even more responsive sex-bud of the younger wench. He could hear the labored breathing of Wood and Derrick, and forced his own breath to come deep and slow and silent, though he had less control over his burgeoning sex.

Sproul watched the expressions on the faces of the three men. The instant Hunnicutt pushed Noele away, he went to the girls and put an arm around each. Where only a while ago he'd wanted to sell them to the two men he saw riding up the lane, now he wanted no such thing. Not with Lee Hunnicutt on the scene. Him with his big plantation and his uncounted thousands in buried gold.

"They's like my own flesh, Mister Hunnicutt," he said. "If I 'us to part with 'em, it's on'y fair to tell ye it'd take a lot of gold—an' then I don' know how I kin part with 'em. They's my wife's own flesh an' blood . . . Mercy there . . . an' I've riz 'em f'um when Suzan wasn't but three months ol' an' Noele here was seven months f'um birth. So ye kin see how I values 'em. Most as much as I do my own three boys. Mine an' Mercy's here . . . Miz Sproul."

Hunnicutt, not surprised at the poor-white's opening gambit, made a show of looking the wenches up and down. He leaned forward and poked Noele in her delectable belly.

Before he could speak, Sproul plunged into his sales argument. "Ye kin see how full-developed they Ma is," he said, "an' how they'll go beyond her looks, 'cause of that beautifyin' drop of black they got in their blood."

Somewhat taken aback that this poor-white ignoramus had on his own thought about a drop of black blood adding beauty to a woman, Hunnicutt nevertheless put up a quick rebuttal. "I don' know theah Ma is fully developed," he said, "I don' know it at all. Undah the circumstances, I got no way to compahe, 'cause she got huh clo'es on an' they ain'. You s'pect me to take youah wohd foah it?"

He saw the poor-white's eyes narrow and his lips thin

out. "Mercy," Sproul ordered, never taking his stare from Hunnicutt, "shuck down."

"Nol" cried the white woman.

"Do whut I say!" Sproul snarled. "It ain' nothin' . . . nothin' a'tall! Ye settin' yerse'f up to bein' better'n yer own daughters?"

Hunnicutt watched Mercy go still. All the color was gone from her face now; it was almost as white as paper. He saw her clench her fists at her sides and close her eyes. Then, moving slowly, eyes closed, she took off her dress and stood naked with her daughters, one on either side of her. Her beauty was the full bloom of their promise.

Wood and Derrick were virtually panting. Unable to tear his eyes from that glorious woman-body, to spare even a glance for the delectable wenches who had sprung from her loins, Hunnicutt ran his tongue over his lips. His brain had never been sharper. He was on the watch now, determined not only to buy the wenches but wildly determined to bed the mother.

"What you askin' foah the wenches?" he asked again.

"I—r-reckon they worth five thousan' apiece," Sproul stammered.

"You crazy?" countered Hunnicutt, still gazing at Mercy, seeking every curve. "I'll pay three thousan' each, an' not a dollah moah."

"I got to git five thousan' apiece, suh," Sproul whined, but with stubbornness backing the whine. "I got a Pa's feelin' fer these wenches, an' I got to keep in min' my wife's sorrow an' bereavement if I sell her daughters off a'tall, much less fer three thousan'!"

Even though he was willing to pay five thousand, Hunnicutt could not permit himself to lose face by giving the fellow his asking price, a thing he'd never yet done, not even among his peers. "We-el," he said, "in defrence to the mothah's feelin's," permitting his eyes to linger hotly on her mound, "I'll pay you foah thousan' dollahs foah each wench."

"That'd be stealin' fum me, Mister Hunnicutt, suh,"

Sproul argued. "Why, ye'll git yer outlay back f'um these wenches in fo'teen years!"

Curious as to the exact meaning of this, Hunnicutt moved his attention from the naked woman to the poor-white husband. "You min' explainin' that statement?" he asked.

"Take they Ma, fer instance," Sproul said. "She's perduced five babies in fifteen years. Not that she couldn't of give me a new one ever' year. Thing is, we may be pore but I foun' a way to keep f'um havin' too many younguns. The five my wife did perduce is handsome an' healthy. All ye got to do, Mister Hunnicutt, is look at these here two wenches. They the livin' proof."

Hunnicutt glanced at the nude wenches, at the nude mother, whose whole lovely body was now suffused with a flush. He pulled his attention back to Sproul. "Go on . . . finish."

"Well, these two wenches kin perduce a sucker apiece ever' year or so," the fellow explained. "With them so near white theyse'fs, if ye was to breed light-skinned studs to 'em, or to honor them with yer own personal attention, they'll perduce beautiful wenches that ye kin sell fer five thousan' dollars apiece in fo'teen years. An' light-skinned bucks fer rich white women to make pets out of an' pleasure theyse'f with. They bring a high price, too."

This all made perfect sense to Hunnicutt, though he was surprised that Sproul had been astute enough to figure it out. Actually, aside from assuaging his sex needs, he would profit dollarwise in this deal. Wenches gotten on these two should be beautiful beyond compare and sell at more than five thousand each.

"Tell you what," he said as if making a great concession, "I'll give you eighty-five hundrahd foah the two. One thousan' in gold heah an' now, an' seventy-five hundrahd in gold when you delivah them to my plantation an' I make suah theah still virgins. How's that foah a faiah deal?"

Sproul considered, frowning fiercely. At last he nodded. "It's a deal," he said. "Lemme see yer gold."

He watched avidly, moving his lips counting the gold pieces Hunnicutt doled out of a poke. Carefully, he laid the gold on the mantel shelf, turned back.

"When ye want I should deliver 'em?" he asked. "When ye goin' to be at yer plantation?"

"Bring them ovah tomorrah," Hunnicutt replied absently. His eyes were on the naked, blushing Mercy, his mind darting and probing for a way to get her alone. "If I ain' theah," he continued, "move into my ovahseah's house with the wenches an' wait. I'll write you out a note to present to Missus Hunnicutt, givin' you leave to use the ovahseah's house. I ain' got a white ovahseah at the moment. He got kilt tryin' to ketch my runaway nigra."

"Mebbe I might stay on in yer overseer's house," Sproul suggested. "I wouldn' min' workin' as yer overseer myse'f."

Hunnicutt hesitated, recognizing that the setup would provide him access to Sproul's tempting wife. Then he shook his head, regretfully relinquishing the opportunity. "No," he said, "with the wenches on the plantation, it'd be no good foah the othah blacks to fin' out the white wife of the white ovahseeah was theah mothah."

Sproul accepted the refusal as though he expected it. "Take the wenches in t'other room," he ordered his naked wife. "Cover yerse'fs, all of ye. Watch an' see they don' fall down or bump or scratch theyse'fs or bruise they skin, 'cause they Mister Hunnicutt's prop'ty now. Hell," he added, "I'll see to it myse'f. You gent'men excuse me a minute."

Hunnicutt watched them leave, then turned his attention to Wood and Derrick, who were squirming in their chairs, their eyes still on the doorway through which the three naked beauties had passed. "Why didn' you put that white trash in his place foah nosin' into youah biz'ness, which is my biz'ness?" he demanded.

"He didn't fin' out nothin' important," Derrick retorted, half-defiant. "We got to be free agents part of the time, anyhow. We can't set an' think what would Mister Lee

Hunnicuttt want us to say—we got to figger out fer ourse'fs what to say."

Hunnicuttt felt rage lick through him. He grabbed the fellow's shirt, half lifting him from the chair, then slammed him back. "I'm payin' you off, heah an' now!" he said, gritting his teeth. He opened his poke again and counted out ten dollars, shoving it across the table. "Take it an' git," he ordered, "an' don' let me see you ag'in."

Derrick's face looked wider and his lips thicker under his sullen anger. He cursed but he scooped up the gold pieces and stowed them in his pocket. Muttering, he pushed back from the table and stomped from the house without a look at either Hunnicutt or Wood. Within seconds there was the sound of his horse galloping away.

"He'll likely try to git even," Hunnicutt said, "but theah ain' nothin' he kin do, nothin' that'll make me no neavah-min'." He turned to Wood, the red-headed one, who was looking carefully just past his eyes. "Ain' you goin' to ask why I sent Derrick packin'?" Hunnicutt demanded.

"I figger it ain't none of my biz'ness, Mister Hunnicutt," Wood replied.

"That the attitude I like," Hunnicutt grunted, dropping back into his chair. "I knew one of you'd bin a bigmouth. I stopped at a tavehn to eat an' was tol' you two had been theah, an' that one of you—not the red-headed one—had been askin' a lot of questions 'bout my runaway buck."

"That's right," Wood said, nodding. "Derrick done that. I tol' him to keep shet but he wouldn't."

"He same as advahtised I 'us tryin' to ketch the nigra on my own, an' keep the militia out," Hunnicutt said angrily. "I don' like that. Derrick's sneaky, an' if I'd kep' him on, he'd tuhn 'roun' an' sneak on me. A man has got to be straight with me, an' I'll be straight with him. You know what I mean?"

"Yep," Wood agreed. "I understan', Mister Hunnicutt. Ye'll fin' me straight as a string."

"That's what I requiah," Hunnicutt said, mollified. He leaned across the table. "If you kotch Royal an' keep the law an' the militia both out of it so's I an' I alone kin mete out his punishmint as is my right as his ownah an' mastah, I'll not on'y pay you the full ten thousan' re-wahd money but will add a five hundrahd dollah bonus."

"That's a powerful reward, suh," Wood said. "It mus' be as much as ye paid fer the black."

"It twice as much," Hunicutt said, voice low, eye on the bedroom door. "But I a'ready got moah than my investment back out of him. Now, undahstan'—this nigra ain' a regulah runnah. Theah ain' nothin' ordinary 'bout him. He stan's six-feet-seven inches, all bone an' muscle an' powah. An' he got brains too, seein' he's a slave. He was a Mandingo emperah in Africa, an' he's a killah. He kilt a white man down on the docks in New Orleans when we was chasin' him theah. Next he beat a white fahmah unconscious an' stole his ho'se, an' aftah that, he snuk back to my plantation an' kidnaped my prize Mandingo wench. Whilst I was chasin' the two of them, he caused moah death an' mayhem than you kin shake a stick at. My bride was wounded, my cousin, Lida Hunnicutt was kilt, an' this nigra attacked my ovahseeah, an' the ovahseeah was kilt. Ain' no proof the nigra kilt them but theah ain' no proof he didn'. An' a young plantation ownah neighbah of mine, name of Owens, was kilt chasin' these two slaves, an' evah damh one of my blood-houn's was kilt, an' some moah of my frien's wounded, an' one slave was shot in the shouldah. So you kin see I got full cause an' right to mete out my own punishmint in this instance. An' on top of all the othah, this Royal got his hands on two pots of gold I had buried, an' made off with fohty-seven thousan' dollahs!"

"Whew!" Wood ejaculated. "Ye sure got reason to want that nigger, Mister Hunnicutt!"

"You kin see why I'm offerin' such a gen'rous re-wahd. Does my slave bein' so big an' mean an' dangerous scah you?"

"Ain't no nigger ever skeered me yit," Wood said. "I got me a pistol in my shirt an' a rifle on my hoss. I'm a expert shot."

"Now you kin appreciate why I don' want some . . . like this trash heah . . . knowin' how much I'm willin' to pay," Hunnicutt said. "What he don' know won't huht him, if he didn' fin' out about the re-wahd in New Orleans. Chances are he ain't been theah an' that he didn' fin' out 'bout my slave if he was. He'd likely spout off at the mouth, might even try to ketch my slave himsef . . . an' such as him an' Derrick might be too quick on the triggah. I mean to take that buck alive."

At this point, Sproul returned. He wore a guilty expression and when he half-met Hunnicutt's accusing eyes, his own dropped and he stared at his feet. "Yep," he admitted sullenly, "I listened. It my house, an' I figger I got a right to hear what's spoke in it."

His attitude, as he lifted his eyes again, proclaimed that, since he and Hunnicutt were already involved in a business deal, he was to be trusted. His tone furthered this.

"I got information to give ye, Mister Hunnicutt," he volunteered. "On the condition that, when yer nigger is ketched, ye'll pay me an extry five hundered dollars."

Hunnicutt was fiercely angry and unwilling to deal with the fellow. However, something about Sproul's air was convincing and he indicated a willingness to listen. If Sproul did prove to have information leading to Royal's capture, it was to Hunnicutt's advantage. If he had no such information, it would cost Hunnicutt nothing.

"They was this big nigger," Sproul related, "tallest, biggest buck I ever seen. He come ridin' up on a hoss three days ago. He 'us dressed fine, an' he kerried a rifle. He traded me the hoss he was ridin' fer one of my hosses an' give me a hundered dollars in gold besides. An' another five fer a jug of whiskey. He said he was a free nigger fum the islands, said he riz pineapples. He claimed he got to Noo Orleans by ship an' was ridin' to

Boston to visit his brother. What ye think of that, Mister Hunnicutt—he soun' like yer runaway black?"

Hunnicutt felt himself slip helplessly into rage. "That was my runaway!" he shouted. "That was my property, an' that was my gold you took f'um him! What you mean by he'pin' a black, anyhow? Don' you know that no nigra goes ridin' a ho'se an' carryin' a rifle an' has gold to spend? Ain' you got brains enough to know what youah doin' in a case like that? An' you wasn' goin' to tell me . . . was you? Not 'til you eavesdropped an' heahd me offah Mistah Wood an' extry five hundrahd. That's what inspiahed you to tell me . . . what you heahd eavesdrop-pin' on my private biz'ness! You got to pay me foah that, my fine fellow, an' in a minute I'll tell you how you got to pay—aftah you give me the res' of my rightful infoh-mation concehnin' my slavel Which direction did he go f'um heah . . . an' how long ago?"

"H-he lef' out right away, Mister Hunnicutt, suh!" Sproul confessed fearfully. "He rid no'th, suh . . . down my lane an' then no'th on the big road! That ever' bit I know . . . I ain' seen him since!"

Hunnicutt motioned to Wood, who was already on his feet. "Take out no'th," he ordered. "We got ridin' to do, an' askin' at ev'ry fahm an' plantation. Take both sides of the big road an' ask until I ketch up to you. Soon's I finish heah, I'll be along."

Wood strode across the room and out the door. Almost immediately there was the sound of his horse galloping away. Hunnicutt turned on the cowering Sproul, whose lips were twitching in his thin face.

"Our deal's on fer the wenches, ain't it, Mister Hunnicutt?" he quavered. "Ye still want 'em, don't ye?"

"I nevah renege on a deal," Hunnicutt said coldly, despising the spineless creature before him, "an' I fuhthah nevah excuse a debt. I figuah you owe me a debt foah not tellin' me 'bout how you he'ped my runaway buck until aftah you eavesdropped on my private biz'ness. An' I got a way—an easy way—foah you to pay that debt."

"Anythin', Mister Hunnicutt!" agreed Sproul. "Ye jus' name it, suhl"

"I'm feelin' the need foah a woman," Hunnicutt told him, "feelin' it deep an' hot. An' I got me a notion to satisfy that need, heah an' now."

"I-I'll git one of the wenches fer yel" stammered Sproul. "If ye'll tell me which one ye want!"

"I ain' in the mood to bust a virgin, ain' got time, in fact," Hunnicutt said. "Tell you what I want, Sproul. I want you should take them wenches outside, down by the shed, say, an' wait with them theah 'til I come out. I aim to satisfy my need with youah wife. That the on'y way you kin repay me foah the wrong you done me . . . an' at the same time avoid givin' me provocation an' justification foah callin' off ouah eighty-five hundrahd dollah deall"

CHAPTER THREE

Sproul stared blankly, mouth hanging open. A dribble of saliva crept out of one corner and down the side of his chin.

"Well?" Hunnicutt demanded. It was an effort to keep from hitting the worm-like creature who considered himself a man.

"But Mercy," Sproul whispered, "she's a white woman!"

"She was white when you ohdahed her to shuck down foah me," Hunnicutt said irritably. "An' white's what I hankah foah right now! Remembah, I'm a white man . . . I'm quality, an' you owe me a debt. It ain't as if it was anothah niggah like she pestahed with fifteen-sixteen yeahs ago! What's it to be, fellow—yes or no?"

Sproul swallowed noisily, went to the inner door. "You Suzan . . . Noele," he ordered. "Git to the shed an' stay there. If yer brothers comes up thisaway, keep them there, too. Hurry it up . . . git!"

Hunnicutt watched as his new-bought wenches, again wearing their colorful dresses, scuttled across the kitchen. Neither of them glanced toward him.

Sproul, still at the inner door, gave his wife her order. "Yer to 'commodate Mister Hunnicutt," he said. "Do as yer tol', an' no argyfyin'. Ye heerd what was said . . . we got no choice."

Mercy, again wearing the blue dress, appeared in the doorway. Sproul turned aside, not waiting for her reply, and hurried outside.

Hunnicutt let his eyes rove the woman's figure, let his gaze burn along the curve of breast, the surge of hip, the

gently outlined, generous mound. His passion, which had not been much subdued all the time he'd been here, renewed itself. His blood began to throb and he gloried in it, for soon it would be quieted, would flow deep and fed and satisfied.

Mercy's eyes came to his, brown and shining and unwilling, and the touch of her gaze inflamed him. "Theah a bed in theah?" he asked, his voice rough.

She nodded, eyes still on his, still unwilling, but a bit wondering now. "Why me?" she asked. "Why me instead of the girls?"

"I saw you fu'st," he replied. "I wanted you befoah I wanted them. An' I reckon you'll give me an idea of what it's goin' to be like with youah daughtahs as they matuah."

Her eyes gave a warning flash. "S'pose I don' give in . . . s'pose I fight you?"

His blood leapt, pulsed at a faster, hotter speed. "Sometimes it makes it bettah foah the man when the woman fights a little," he replied. "You goin' to fight me, Mercy?"

"Not the way you mean. I'll fight you another way."

"An' how is that?"

"I'll lay still on the bed," she told him. "You can't make me take part. That way you won't git the pleasure you think yer goin' to git."

"We'll seel" he exulted, the wine of passion singing in all his parts. "Strip off that dress an' lay down on a bed, an' we'll jus' seel"

She went into the bedroom, lifting her dress up and over her head as she walked, and he followed. There were dimples in her buttocks, and they flashed and hid and flashed again. It was as though her buttocks were beckoning him, winking and enticing. She tossed her dress onto the second bed in the room and lay down on the other. She lay on her back, her full, rich breasts not flattening as did the breasts of many women, but standing full and firm, the big nipples erect in spite of her avowed intention not to participate in what was to

come. Her belly was firm and flat, unmarked by child-bearing, her mound a tawny, wild temptation.

Shaking with impatience, Hunnicutt got out of his clothes. Naked, he stretched flat on her nude body, his swollen organ lying along that tantalizing mound. She smelled of coarse, homemade sap, but on her the smell was good, making her clean as the windswept sun. Her breasts were firm and springy under his chest, the up-standing nipples slightly rough. He moved his hips, rotating them, causing his member to stir the tawny-haired mound, and as he continued the motion, felt her body quiver ever so slightly despite her declared intention of giving him no response whatsoever.

He made his movement stronger, at the same time shifting his weight to his elbows, and holding her surging breasts in his hands, rubbing the nipples gently with his thumbs. He heard her breath catch, saw her eyes close and her teeth hold her lower lip. There was a pulse throbbing in her throat. As he increased the speed of his movement and the pressure of his loins on hers, the pulse in her throat beat faster. And as he caressed her nipples more fervidly, they hardened further, stood taller, and he could feel the throb of her pulse in her breasts beneath the nipples, deep and thundering.

"You 'bout ready foah me, you bitch?" he growled, passion making his voice rough.

"I'm ready, you devill!" she purr-growled. "Put yerse'f in me, Devil . . . an' I'll twist that devil-part of yer off! I didn't want no pesterin' with ye . . . I aimed to fight ye . . . but now I figger I got somethin' comin' to me! I got a right to be pestered by the Devil jest once in my life!"

He lifted his loins from her and she threw her legs apart. With one keen move, he positioned himself and drove his throbbing, lusting member deep into her amazingly tight, deep, hot, moist, clutching tunnel. She started to buck before he moved, almost throwing him off, but he drove her back, pinioning her to the mattress, and drove mightily back against her continued wild bucking.

He had to best her, had to keep her pinned down, but he could not. She was lunging upward, and it took all his might and skill to force her hips to the mattress again, beat them to the mattress. And all the while the tip of his organ was growing, was burning, was tight with his unexploded need, reaching for the glorious, hot, pouring moment. At the same time the wild woman under him was climbing his organ in a feral manner for what it and it alone could give to her.

He heard her gurgle and they hung in midthrust, his cresting passion bursting free and pouring into her depths, her passion open and throbbing on his organ. They moaned together in fulfilment.

Even after they were spent, he lay atop her, his still tumescent manhood in that tight, moist, hot clasp, her hips moving ever so slightly, in remembrance. Her breath hit his cheek, warm and sweet, and now the smells of their passion mingled with the odors of soap and sunlight on her. Breathing these in, Lee Hunnicutt realized that Mercy Sproul, wife of a white-trash farmer, was the best woman he had ever bedded. Better for him than his Yankee bride, better than the Madam, Belle, better than his dead cousin, Lida.

"Mebbe I'll reconsidah givin' youah husban' the job as ovahseeah of Hunnicutt Hill," he told the nude woman.

"It wouldn't be like you'd want," Mercy said. "It'd be like ye told Zeb. Ye'll have Suzan an' Noele . . . they're me all over ag'in, what part ain't their Pa, Tintin. They'll learn fast to be what you want. They'll like the way you are."

"Then you did like it?" he pressed.

"Ag'in my will . . . but I did," she admitted. "It won't be ag'in their will. I'll see to that."

"You'll see to it theah satisfied with what they git at Hunnicutt Hill?" he asked. "Not want to run?"

"Why should they run?" she countered. "You kin keep 'em satisfied in bed. If you treat 'em kind an' give 'em a good place to live, an' clo'es an' food, I reckon they can't

do no better than with you, seein' they have to be sold off a'tall an' not have husban's of their own."

"I'll be good to 'em," Hunnicutt promised, meaning the promise. "They'll have theah own house, a white folks house, not a nigra cabin. They'll have my own cousin Lida's house, who was kilt three nights ago. They'll live like white girls, not like nigras, 'specially if they please me like you jus' done."

She sighed and closed her eyes. Her face was in repose.

"You ready foah anothah go?" he asked.

"Hmmm," she agreed, a wildness coursing her voice.

CHAPTER FOUR

Royal lay on his belly behind the hackberry bushes and watched the poor-white's shanty-house. After a while he saw one of the first horsemen come out—not the red-haired one—moving as though he were very angry. The man jumped onto his mount and galloped away, raising a cloud of dust. At the end of the lane, he turned toward New Orleans.

Royal considered this departure. He did not think the man had been sent on an errand regarding himself; he thought rather that the man was possibly very angry at the master, Lee Hunnicutt.

He returned his attention to the shanty, which sat hot and decrepit in the full, shimmering August sun. Time crept on. Since Hunnicutt and the red-haired man were staying so long, Royal began to figure the poor-white was sure enough telling about the big Negro who traded him a horse, paying one hundred dollars in gold, that he was telling about the rifle the Negro had carried and the jug of whiskey he had bought. He also figured the poor-white was telling in what direction the Negro had gone when he rode away.

Now the red-haired man came out of the shanty, got on his horse and galloped to the end of the lane. There he rode north.

Royal waited, peering again at the shanty. He wondered what the master and the shanty-man were discussing now. His hunger was a wild thing in his belly; it gnawed and ached. He hadn't eaten in three days, not since he'd finished the packet of food the shanty-woman had prepared.

Suddenly he came alert. Two young girls ran out of

the shanty-house and didn't stop running until they reached a shed, where they stopped in a patch of shade. A moment later, the poor-white came out of the shanty and joined the girls. At the same time three stringy boys came from the distance beyond and stopped with the others.

Royal turned his gaze back to the shanty. The master was still in there and so was the shanty-woman. Time crawled past. The group at the shed remained there. No one came out of the shanty.

It was then that Royal knew, knew for sure. The master was pestering the poor-white's wife and the fellow was tolerating it! He was waiting for the plantation owner to take his pleasure! Sweat popped out anew on Royal. Was there no end to what the white man would do? Was there any understanding the white man? Was the white man always suspicious of the black man, did he want to keep the black man in slavery always, to hunt him down if he escaped?

Lying on his gnawing, ravening belly, Royal watched the poor-white and his young. The hackberry bushes brushed his face now and again.

How could he ever escape to a Northern state, as big as he was—so much taller and broader than other slaves—so obviously African? How could he escape with a reward on his head and so many white men greedy for gold? How was he to succeed, even with the freedom paper he'd bought in New Orleans?

Even then Hunnicutt and his thugs and the New Orleans police had almost captured Royal on the waterfront. Bennie, the man who had got Royal the fake freedom paper, had betrayed him because he wanted a part of the reward. That was when Royal had been forced to kill a white man—during his fight to escape the thugs and the police. The white man had been one of Hunnicutt's hired thugs, true, but he was nonetheless a white man, and a worse thing than kill a white man a slave could not do. That act alone would condemn Royal to death either at the hands of the master or the law.

For three days, ever since he had bought the horse from the poor-white, Royal had been moving only by night, walking his horse cautiously, taking care to avoid the patrollers and any others who used the roads. Eventually, he knew, he would be seen and then every white man in the South would be on his trail. At the rate he had been going, covering only nine or ten miles a night, he had estimated it would have taken him three months to reach a free state in the North. When he realized this was too dangerous and he scarcely had a chance, he had turned back and slowly worked his way again to this spot. He had but one course open—to find a white family who would agree to hide him in their wagon and drive him North. There was no other safe transport, except by sea, and that too was impossible, for he dared not openly return to New Orleans, where both police and populace were on the lookout for him.

With the almost two thousand dollars in gold in his saddlebags, plus as much more as might be needed from the forty-five thousand he'd buried in the timber here, Royal hoped he might persuade the poor-white to take payment and smuggle him North. In that event, traveling by wagon, he would take the buried gold with him and turn it over to the mistress when she too escaped the tyranny of Lee Hunnicutt. At that time she would bring Princess, Royal's empress, his love, to meet him in Boston.

Now he frowned, watching the poor-white, who was squatting in the shade. The fellow could agree to take Royal in his wagon, could accept his gold and eventually openly take the rest of the gold from him and later betray him to the law and collect the reward as well. And Royal would still be in the South . . . at the mercy of the law, or, even worse, at the mercy of Lee Hunnicutt.

He knew he should retire into the timber. He needed to check on the horse, make sure he hadn't broken loose. He should reconnoiter and make sure the spot where he'd buried the gold was unmolested. But he remained

where he was, for it was more important to see in what direction the master rode when he left here and then consider his own immediate next move.

Considering and reconsidering, he could think of only the one way, fraught with danger though it was, for him to escape. And that was to pay white people to hide him or, failing that, to pass him off as their chattel.

Now Hunnicutt appeared at the doorway of the shanty. Without so much as glancing toward the poor-white, who began slouching toward him, the master mounted and went galloping down the lane. At the big road he turned north as the red-haired man had done, his horse traveling at an easy lope.

So the poor-white really had told how Royal had bought a horse and had ridden north! Hunnicutt had obviously sent the red-haired man ahead and, now that he had pleased himself with the white woman, was riding after him to trail and trace his runaway slave.

The children went running into the shanty, the father following slowly. Royal wondered how he could face the wife he'd let another man pester, wondered if she was angry or weeping, or if this was a thing which happened often.

Still longer he watched the shanty. Smoke crept from the leaning chimney, thickened and stood toward the sky. The woman was cooking a meal, Royal thought, his belly twisting.

Still cautious, even though the whites were inside, he began wriggling along the ground toward the timber, dragging his rifle with him. He'd not risk standing until he reached full cover, where he could move from tree to tree, bush to bush, for others might well be abroad.

His horse was cropping patches of grass among trees. The brush-covered spot at the base of a great oak where Royal had buried the gold was undisturbed. He sat down against another tree, ears attuned to the slightest sound. There was nothing but the small noises of his horse, the flutter of a bird, somewhere at a distance a

mockers singing, and underneath all the constant, mysterious notes of hidden bugs.

He would wait until dusk. At that time, if no one else had come to the shanty, he would steal up to the door and make known his needs. The poor-white, even though he may have enlisted to help Hunnicutt, might still let the slave outbid the master. With luck, Royal could be on his way, white family and all, before Lee Hunnicutt and the red-haired man returned.

As to possible double-dealing on the part of the poor-white, it would be up to Royal to thwart him. Royal knew he would die before he would submit to capture—but he must not die, for there was Princess. Even now she was at Hunnicutt Hill nursing the mistress, Frances Hunnicutt, who had been wounded three nights ago during the fight in the cave. Only Royal had escaped, taking with him, at the mistress' order, all the gold.

He indulged in a moment of dreaming of Princess. Half-white, she was almost six feet tall, with great, pure, high breasts, a waist that swept in and thighs which surged out. Her skin was tan in color, her eyes were green, and her gleaming auburn hair fell in deep waves and big, loose curls to her shoulders.

She was the princess of one of the Mandingo tribes Royal had ruled in Africa. She was the girl he had planned to make his empress, to rule at his side. Before he could do this, he was captured and brought to this great tribe called Louisiana and the Hunnicutt Hill part called The Delta and was sold to Lee Hunnicutt. And a year later, this very year of 1852, Princess had been captured and brought to the same white tribe and also sold to Lee Hunnicutt. The master had a standing order with Captain Delft to bring to him such prize Mandingo as Royal and Princess.

Consequently, when Royal had been ordered by the master to cover Princess for the purpose of making a sucker, he had taken her for his empress. He had whispered that one day they would return to Africa. There

they would drink the cup of yam wine together, as was the custom. But for the moment, in the act of love, he had whispered, he took her as empress, joining himself to her for life.

That same morning, before Royal's eyes, Slocum, the overseer had raped and abused Princess. Straining at the chains which bound him to the bunk in the stud cabin, Royal had seen his love torn and bruised.

Hunnicuttt had blamed Royal for hurting the prize wench and had lashed him and thrown him into the plantation jail. There Royal had met a slave named Ebon, who was quietly organizing an uprising among the blacks of Hunnicutt Hill.

Weeks later, when Royal was locked one night into a stud pen with nineteen other bucks, he'd had trouble with Guy, the tremendous black fighter Hunnicutt valued highly. The master pitted Guy against the fighters of other plantation owners for sport. On this night, Guy had mouthed insult after insult about Princess. He had mentioned parts of her pure, beautiful body. He had covered her name with the filth of his mind and his tongue.

Royal had leapt upon the buck and they had fought viciously. Slocum had heard the noise and flung open the door of the pen but the slaves had parted the fighters and he could not identify them. Hunnicutt had appeared and tried to find out which slaves had been fighting but not one would tell.

In a rage, the master had Slocum and two trusties spancel every buck to his bunk-shelf in such manner that he couldn't get to his penis. Hunnicutt then had Princess and another wench named Pansy brought to the pen and had forced them to shuck off their clothes. He and Slocum had pestered the two wenches, traded, pestered again, letting the chained studs watch and drool, to torture and punish them. Before Princess had been permitted to leave, ravaged and bleeding, she had been taken by one of the trusties as well.

Later, Frances Hunnicutt had stolen into the pen, had

freed Royal and taken him to her chamber. Princess lay in the mistress' own bed, weak and ill from miscarriage of what may have been Royal's son or may have been Slocum's get.

Frances Hunnicutt had saved Princess' life by nursing her. She had confided that she wanted to escape as much as did any slave. Royal had even lain with the mistress that night at her request, which had come from her need, and which had been the only manner in which he could serve her for helping Princess.

The mistress had later helped Royal to escape, giving him a bit of gold, and promising to bring Princess to Boston when the girl was strong enough to travel. Royal had ended up in the arms of the beautiful Lida, Hunnicutt's cousin, who, in turn, had hidden him in Belle's Pleasure Palace in New Orleans, leasing him out to the madam until she could herself reclaim him.

There Royal had serviced Belle herself day and night. Each night also he had serviced one sex-starved white woman customer, a different one every night, for which favor Belle had charged an enormous price. Royal had saved the salary she paid him and waited for Lida to return. After a month, Hunnicutt had got wind of Royal's presence in the whorehouse and Royal had fled.

He had hidden in the waterfront crib of a white whore. She had got him a fake freedom paper and the man who had provided the paper had betrayed Royal to the police. After a fight on the wharf, during which he had killed the thug, Royal had fled back to Hunnicutt Hill and kidnaped Princess.

They had been surrounded and there had been a great fight in a hidden cave. During the fight, the overseer and a young plantation owner had been killed and the mistress had been wounded. Princess had remained behind to nurse the mistress as the mistress had nursed her.

Royal had escaped and here he was, at this moment, in the timber near the poor-white's shanty. He breathed deeply, aware that his breath was making a sound in the stillness, aware also with every African instinct of the

middle plateau, that there was no ear to hear. There was just his horse, himself, and the little wild things.

Dusk was gathering in the trees. Stealthily he crept to the rim of hackberry bushes. It was almost time to approach the shanty.

CHAPTER FIVE

A light twinkled inside the shanty. There was no sign, in the thick gray dusk outside, of any tethered horses. This indicated that neither Hunnicutt nor the red-haired man had yet returned.

Royal got a faint, lingering whiff of fried fatback. This made his empty belly seem to twist and roll in its starvation-like hunger.

He lay gazing through the same bushes, watching. If the poor-white should himself suddenly ride away, Royal could at least see in what direction he rode. None of this, of course, would help him beyond letting him know what was taking place in his immediate vicinity. He felt some degree of security for the moment because Hunnicutt, patrollers, the red-haired man or the poor-white himself, wouldn't expect the runaway slave to be lurking at the very spot from which he had fled only three days ago.

He decided to wait before approaching the shanty. He'd make reasonably certain that no one else was going to arrive before he showed himself. Thus, watching what appeared to be normal activity inside the shanty, seeing the woman pass and repass the lighted doorway, Royal saw what he had missed before.

The white woman was no slattern. Rather, she was comely, pleasingly formed, and wore a blue dress. From the brightness of the color, Royal judged it was a new dress, undoubtedly bought with some of the gold he had paid her husband.

He wondered if she had food left from the family meal. Bile rose in his throat, bitter with hunger.

Finally, when darkness had closed around the shanty,

when soft black night had smoothed away all the daytime shabbiness of the place and clothed it in dark, velvety, starlit beauty, Royal moved. He made his way openly but in great, soundless strides right up to the door. He leaned his rifle against the outer wall.

"Suh," he called softly, for thus must he address the white man, even this poor-white, "suh . . . it's me . . . the colored gentleman from the islands. The one who bought the horse."

The man instantly appeared in the doorway, rifle ready. "Put yer han's up!" he snarled. "Put 'em up!"

Royal complied, knowing the fellow meant to turn him in for the reward but knowing too that there was no immediate way for him to do so.

"How-come yer sneakin' 'roun' if yer a free nigger?" demanded the man.

"I'm afraid I'll be mistaken foah that runaway slave theah's such a big reward foah," Royal replied boldly. "From what I've been told about the South and from what I've seen in the short time I've been heah, if I'm apprehended on suspicion of being that slave, I'll have a difficult time proving my identity."

"Specially if ye are that nigger," the poor-white said.

"May I show you my identification?" Royal asked, recalling how the fellow had handled that paper a few days earlier, how he had passed it to his wife, who passed it back. He knew that many poor whites couldn't read and that this pair was no exception.

"I seen yer papers a'ready!" the man scoffed. "Niggers allus buyin' fake papers—freedom papers, they calls 'em. Why should I take the trouble to read 'em when they likely false?"

Royal could see that, in spite of himself, the fellow was impressed by his mere possession of the paper, by his gold, which he had spent freely, and by his manner.

"I come this time," Royal said quietly, "to ask you to transport me North in youah wagon. For a consideration. I have seen that you have a wagon beyond the shed, and horses."

The fellow laughed, a wet snort. "I got other use fer my waggin right now," he said.

"I'm thinking in terms of thousands," Royal said. "In gold."

"So'm I! Eight-thousan' five hundred! How's that sound, nigger?"

"I'll pay you ten thousand in gold the moment you hitch up and we're ready to start," Royal said.

His words struck the poor-white silent. The woman came up behind him and looked through the door to where Royal stood in the outshine of candlelight.

"If yer the runaway buck they lookin' fer," the man said at last, "I'd ruther collect the re-ward. That's ten thousan' itse'f. An' no risk of bein' caught smugglin' Mister Lee Hunnicutt's chattel slave out of the country into the North."

"I'm a free man," Royal repeated. "And that's ten thousand when we start, with an additional two thousand when we cross into a Northern state. This is sure, suh . . . it is certain. Nobody else can try to share in this money, as they might try to share in the reward . . . if I were the runaway slave. Since I'm not the runaway," he lied gently, "how could you collect a reward?"

The poor-white lowered his rifle. "Where'd ye git twelve thousan'?" he demanded. "Is it part of the gold that runaway buck stoled f'm Mister Hunnicutt? Where'd ye hide Mister Hunnicutt's gold, nigger?"

Royal tried to look and act composed. "I'm from the islands," he repeated, "where I'm making my fortune in pineapples. I've no need to run away from any mastah. My only concern is to avoid being mistaken for this runaway slave you keep talking about. I'm a wealthy man . . . I have no need to steal. I have never stole gold, suh."

Which was true. The mistress had given him the gold. She wanted him to use it however he must use it.

"Lemme think," the shanty-man said. "I got to deliver two wenches to Hunnicutt Hill tomorra. I sol' 'em to him, an' he paid me a thousan' dollers in advance. I got to

wait fer him to come back f'um chasin' after his runaway nigger an' pay the rest of the money. I'm gittin' eighty-five hundred, an' I want to keep that even if I was to take ye North fer twelve thousan'."

Royal let his mind race. Instead of being a snag, this development might prove to be good. By this time, the mistress was either dead from her wound or she was recovering. If she was dead, she'd not be able to take Princess to Boston and Princess might not be able to get there through her own efforts. Certainly no one would really expect Royal to return to Hunnicutt Hill for the second time, or, should Hunnicutt suspect, he was presently seeking Royal elsewhere.

To go with this fellow when he delivered the wenches offered a means by which Royal could be smuggled back onto the plantation. Once there he would, for the second time, kidnap his love. He and Princess could hide in the swamp until the poor-white left Hunnicutt Hill, could be picked up by his wagon and proceed North.

"Thing is," the fellow said now, "my wife an' the wenches'll have to take turns with the boys ridin' the waggin as 'tis. My hosses can't take the extry load of a big, heavy, hulkin' nigger, 'specially one that may be a runner. Ye kin pay me the twelve thousan' an' trail the waggin, an' hide in the swamp or along the road if ye got to. After I deliver the wenches, I'll take ye North. But when we git there, ye got to pay me another twelve thousan' so's I'll be fixed fer life. If yer rich enough to have one twelve-thousan' dollars, then yer rich enough to have another twelve thousan'."

Royal knew that once arrived at Hunnicutt Hill this man could turn him in and collect the ten thousand dollar reward. He might easily become frightened and take less money to ensure his own hide.

"Well?" prodded the poor-white. "What ye say?"

"Zeb," the woman put in, "why don't we head North now . . . tonight? Taking this black. Why don't we fergit Hunnicutt Hill? Ain't twelve thousan' dollers enough?"

The husband turned on her. "I'm boss here," he snarled, "an' don' ye fergit it! You finish up packin' grub an' water. Git them wenches to tie up the clo'es in a bundle. Merle, ye he'p fetch the stuff to the waggin whilst I hitch up. Tie the cow to the back of the waggin an' load in some corn fer the critters. Not much . . . jus' one feedin', 'cause we'll be at Hunnicutt Hill an' they kin provide, them bein' rich." He turned again to Royal. "Nigger, git yer hoss an' yer gold. Come back here by the time we ready."

"I'll do that, suh," Royal agreed. He unobtrusively took his rifle from where he had leaned it and went in a space-covering, quiet lope into the timber. There, by the light of the stars, he dug up more than enough gold to meet the poor-white's demands, loaded it into his saddlebags, and again concealed the remaining cache.

Leading his horse, he arrived at the area behind the shed just as the woman was bedding her two smallest boys in the rear of the wagon. While she was busy at this, and settling their meager belongings, Royal counted out ten thousand dollars by the light of the lantern the poor-white set on the ground. The fellow clutched at the gold pieces, piling them into a bed sheet he'd spread out. When Royal stopped counting, the man glared at him. "Two thousan' more," he demanded. "I ain' agreein' to ten thousan' now an' two thousan' when we git North. It twelve thousan' now, an' 'nother twelve when we git North. Take it or leave it."

Silently Royal counted out an additional two thousand. The white man tied it into the sheet and stowed the heavy, clanking bundle under the wagon seat.

"That rifle," he said, coming back. "Give it to me."

"I'm sorry, suh," Royal said. "I'm no runaway slave, remembah . . . I'm a man from the islands, a man of means. If I'm to follow youah wagon as planned, if I'm to hide in the swamp and the timbah, I'll need my rifle." He waited, blood thudding in his ears, for the white man's reaction to his bold speech.

The fellow considered, his mouth twisting thoughtfully. "Ye kin keep it fer now," he said at last.

"Thank you, suh," Royal said, because he must. Then, to the woman, "Please, Ma'am . . . could I have a bite to eat?"

She started to reach into the wagon, and her husband gave her a push. "I make the decisions," he reminded her sullenly. "It a extravagance but I reckon he got to eat if he got to travel. Give him some fatback an' pone, an' we'll git goin'. Ye stay here 'til we gone, min'?" he said to Royal. "When we a safe distance, then ye foller."

"Yes, suh," Royal agreed. "I'll do that, suh."

His stomach was trembling for the food; his fingers were shaking on the packet the woman had given him. The wonderful aromas went into his nose and down his throat and twined into his belly, promising and tantalizing.

He watched the family mount the wagon. He waited while the man shook the reins over the backs of his horses and cracked his whip. He looked on as the equipage pulled out, the cow moving slowly along, tied to the tailgate of the wagon. Before they were well into the lane, Royal was eating hungrily, as if he had never eaten before.

Not until after the wagon was well along the road southward, not until it was but a slow-moving dark blotch under the stars, did Royal mount and gently kick his horse into a walk. Now and then he pulled up and waited, making certain the wagon kept a good distance ahead, as the poor-white had demanded.

Royal was aware that going to Hunnicutt Hill was almost suicidal. If it weren't for the possibility that the mistress might have died, leaving Princess stranded, he would split off from the wagon now and seek white transport elsewhere. But he had no choice; Princess came first.

He reined in, waited until the wagon was around a bend in the road, beyond. Slowly he followed, ever on

the watch for horseman or rig. Through darkness he trailed the vehicle by the sound of its rattling and creaking.

Soon he heard high, angry voices from the wagon and when they continued he urged his horse faster until he had drawn near enough to hear and not be seen. The white woman was, at last, talking back to her husband. Royal had the feeling that this was the first time she had ever dared to do such a thing.

"I want that money fer the wenches!" the man was shouting. "Know what that adds up to, woman? I'll have eighteen thousan', five hunderd all told! No, by gawd—it'll be twenty thousan', five hunderd—plus the ten thousan' re-ward! Ye re'lize how damn much money that is, woman? An' how do I know the nigger's even got another twelve thousan'?"

"Why not give him a chance?" cried the woman. "Give him a chance to prove he's got the twelve thousan'! If he's really got it . . . then yer kin decide whether ye'll sell Suzan an' Noele, or whether ye'll take all of us straight North, like I said!"

"Ye witless fool!" shouted the poor-white. "Don' ye know that if I give the nigger a chanct to show his twelve thousan', I'd have to kill him . . . that they ain' no trustin' one of 'em? The on'y way we'd be safe'd be to kill him afore he kilt us! Think a nigger'd keep his word? It ain't nigger nature—you'd ought to know that!"

"We'd have the gold!" she screamed. "Why would he hurt us? What reason'd he have—we'd have the gold!"

"'Cause that's how he is, how all niggers is . . . they don' need a reason!" the husband yelled. "He'd wait 'til jus' afore we crossed into the North, an' then he'd kill us all, an' take his gold back! No, on'y way we kin wu'k it is to pertend to do what he wants, kill him, an' take the gold, then all of us go North."

"The girls, too?" the wife cried.

"Yes, damnit!" the man shouted. "The wenches tool! Think I'm a slaver or somethin'? Didn' I raise them

wenches? Up North they'll live in style an' marry white men, an' the white men'll never know the diff'rance!"

At this point, Royal guided his horse off the road and reined up in the night shadow of a big oak. Beyond him, on either side of the road, was thick woods. He didn't want to be within rifle range if the poor-white found out he'd overheard the shouted argument. It sure wasn't safe for a black to overhear a white man's plans, Royal thought. Nor was it safe not to overhear such plans as this white man was making.

Royal had heard enough to render himself doubly alert. He was in nearly as bad shape now as when he was first captured in Africa and chained aboard the slaver. He nudged his horse into the slowest possible walk, kept to the grassy shoulder of the road, and listened deeply for anyone else who might be abroad.

He wondered if, should the poor-white meet patrollers, he would turn cowardly and tell that the runaway stud was trailing his wagon. Doing thus, he would forfeit thousands and have to settle for only a portion of the reward. Yet this he might conceivably do, being unpredictable. Royal couldn't see him sticking to any course of action long at a time, because, after overhearing the conversation, he knew how easily the fellow became frightened.

Keeping his horse at the loitering pace, ready at an instant to turn into the woods, Royal considered what he should now do. From whatever angle he viewed his problem, he came back to the one answer. There was still Princess.

Ever cautious, he continued to follow the wagon, stopping frequently, letting the distance widen. There were advantages to his present course. If the wagon did meet patrollers, then Royal was not fleeing needlessly, away from Princess. If it did meet patrollers, and the poor-white reported Royal's whereabouts, then he would better know which direction to run. Further, any patrollers out tonight would scarcely expect a runaway slave with

ten thousand dollars on his head to be following a wagonload of white people.

From this moment, Royal must avoid all white even more assiduously than before. Except the fellow in the wagon, whose cupidity just might keep him silent. He might want Royal alive and free long enough to get him to the northern border so he could kill him and search his effects for the additional twelve thousand dollars.

Royal would have to be on constant guard against his white helper. He'd have to be prepared to do whatever he must do when the crucial moment of crossing into the North arrived.

A difference in the sounds from the wagon caused him again to rein to a halt and listen. For some reason the poor-white had turned off the road and was driving his creaking, complaining wagon through the woods. Wondering why he was not progressing directly to Hunnicutt Hill, Royal dismounted and followed, leading his horse. He stepped lightly and soundlessly. He wished he had something with which to pad the horse's feet, for he didn't want the white man to be certain that the suspected runaway was still trailing the wagon.

Consequently, he stood for some moments in the woods and listened. Even after the sounds of the wagon had ceased, he listened. They must be making camp, he thought, and wondered why.

Now, from deep in the timber, he heard voices. There was the sharp crack of a rifle. There were screams, frenzied and high-pitched.

CHAPTER SIX

Swiftly, the wool on his neck crawling, he led his horse into deeper woods and tethered him. The voices ahead were lower now but did not cease.

Rifle in hand, Royal crept toward the voices. Finally, through the trees ahead, he spied a clearing. A pale arc of moon had risen in the hot, starlit sky, illuminating the clearing in its disturbed night peace.

Nerves tight, Royal stealthily moved into position behind a big oak and peered cautiously out. He saw two lighted lanterns set on the ground, a deserted, tumble-down shanty beyond, and from further still, heard the sound of a fast-running creek.

There were four saddle horses tied to trees and four white men vigorously taking over the wagon and the family. Two of the men were dumping the poor-white onto the ground, and from the way he fell and did not move, Royal knew he was dead, that he had been killed by the rifle shot. A third man ordered the woman out of the wagon. Royal watched as she jumped to the ground and began to run for the timber. Both the men on the ground pursued her and dragged her back over in front of the tumble-down shanty where the lanterns were set on a couple of tree stumps.

Moving from tree to tree, Royal made his way around the clearing and to the back of the shanty. It was black-dark in the spot he chose, an overhang of tree limbs creating a puddle of safety from which he could see what was taking place.

The two men on the wagon were rummaging in the wagon bed, cursing and ordering the two girls and the little boys to be quiet or they'd be killed. They seemed to

find the gold hidden under the seat, for they huddled over that place and muttered secretly together.

Meanwhile, the two other men stood the woman in front of one of the lanterns. This was perhaps two of Royal's great paces away, the wagon four or five paces in the other direction.

"Don' you move fum thet place," one man growled at the woman. "We aim t' see whut's goin' to happen, so's we kin enjoy ourse'fs."

The woman stood straight and mute. The lantern light shone through her skirt, outlining her shapely thighs. One of the men whistled. "See that!" he chortled. "Strip, woman . . . git them duds off, an' git' em off fast!"

"Pleasel" she cried. "Ain't it enough them others kilt my husband?"

"Ifn yer goin' to be stubborn," the first man said, "we kin jus' as well kill ye like we kilt him. An' yer kids. Take yer choice—strip or git everybody kilt."

"Take the waggin!" the woman screamed. "Take the gold! Take the hosses, an' the cow . . . take all we got, but don' kill me, an' don' kill my chir'en! I'll do anythin' ye want . . . jus' don' kill us!"

The man laughed. One said, "That's better. Now do like we said in the fu'st place. Shuck down an' we'll look ye over an' decide do we wan' to pester you."

The woman removed her dress. In the combined lantern and moonlight, her lush white body was utterly lovely. She faced the men, who both began to move toward her.

Royal was close enough that he could see a look on her face like that on Princess when the overseer ravished her, like he'd seen on slaves. He had never been able to become hardened to that look or to reconcile himself to it.

Always before, in such a situation, he had himself been a helpless slave, watching another slave degraded. But not now. Now, tonight, at this moment, he was free. He was his own man. At this moment he could help this woman and her children.

The woman herself he must temporarily abandon. She had bedded men before; she was now making her own bargain, albeit against her will. The men on the wagon must be dealt with before they turned from the gold to the young girls.

Royal moved back, walked quietly along the rear of the shanty, crept along its side in black shadow. The men in the wagon were still absorbed in the gold.

Royal looked toward the nude woman just as the first man pushed her onto the ground, his body quickly covering her, his hands squeezing her breasts so roughly she cried out. She struggled and the man slapped her in the mouth, then began to jerk and pound her body as he went for fulfilment. The second man stood over the coupled pair, his back to the wagon, and swore and muttered and watched.

Royal laid his rifle on the ground. Then, silent as some jungle cat, he went leaping for the wagon. With one last surge, he landed in the wagon and sprang at one of the men, catching him unawares, clamping one great hand across his mouth. At the same time he kicked mightily as the other man faced round, his boot landing in the white man's groin, sending him crashing backward out of the wagon.

The man in his clutch gave a strong twist, almost breaking free. With the swiftness of lightning, Royal brought the edge of his great hand slashing down onto the back of the neck, which gave a loud snap. The body wilted to the wagon bed and was still, the head at a crazy angle.

Now the one on the ground was up, rifle in hand. Royal dived off the wagon, hitting him broadside, knocking him flat. Royal grabbed the fellow's rifle, one hand grasping the barrel, the other the stock. The white man hung onto the weapon, pulling himself up, then began to yank, trying to wrest it from Royal, who gave one powerful jerk and the rifle was his.

Before he could either drop it or aim it, the white man came plunging at him. Royal lifted the weapon and

smashed it broadside into the fellow's face, again knocking him backward. Dropping the rifle, he dived onto the man and grabbed his neck. Powerfully he sank his big thumbs into the windpipe, cutting off the scream before it sounded. He knelt thus, pressing, until he felt life go out of the man, and then he danced to his feet, rifle again in hand, his attention on the far side of the clearing.

The first man had just finished with the woman. "Yer turn," he sang out to his companion.

Both were as yet unaware of what had been silently transpiring at the wagon, apparently so intent upon the woman that they assumed their companions were occupied in wrestling with the young girls.

Now the second man said, "I'm goin' ter sample one of them young, unbroke girls in the waggin."

Together they turned toward the wagon, together yelled in angry surprise. One of them grabbed his rifle, but before he could aim, Royal lifted his weapon and pulled trigger. At first he thought he'd missed, and then he saw the man sag to the ground, clutching his chest.

The second man was charging, knife in hand. Royal waited, feet apart, knees slightly bent, breath sucking strongly in and out, rifle held like a club. He jumped aside, and the white man hurtled past, bringing up and whirling about for another charge. But Royal was upon him, slamming the rifle barrel down on his head, lifting it for another blow. The man reeled, and Royal was after him, rifle flailing, crunching the skull, beating the fellow to the ground, pounding him dead.

Breathing in painful surges, Royal turned to the naked woman who was standing stiff and motionless and staring. In a stride he reached the spot where she had dropped her dress, picked it up and handed it to her.

Close up this way, he saw how beautiful her body was. He watched while she covered herself and noticed that her hands were trembling.

From the wagon came the sound of the girls sobbing. The two youngest boys seemed to be asleep but the old-

est boy, who looked to be about twelve, looking stiff and frightened, had moved to sit on the tailgate, his legs hanging down.

Royal surveyed the clearing. There were five dead men lying about, all of them white. And he had killed four of them.

"You saved us!" the woman exclaimed. "I'll do anythin' to pay ye fer that! I'll take ye North, like ye want. I kin claim I'm the mistress an' yer my slave. If on'y ye don' take a notion like he did—" She jerked her head toward her dead husband. "—that they ought to be sol'. They kin pass fer white in the North without no trouble a'tall. Tintin, they Pa, could almost have passed."

"You don't have to sell youah daughtahs," Royal told her. "But you must take me to Hunnicutt Hill. I'll find some hay to load the wagon with and hide undah the hay. I've got an errand at Hunnicutt Hill. Nobody there will expect a woman to be delivering two wenches and anyway you have three boys, as well."

"I reckon," she agreed slowly. "If Mister Hunnicutt ain't come home yit, an' if he don' see the girls, mebbe we kin kerry it off. But if he does see 'em . . . an' s'pose somebody starts askin' me questions, like who I am an' what am I doin' where I am?"

"You can pretend to be lost, on youah way to relatives," Royal said. "You can ask directions to some town far enough away to make it sound reasonable."

"I reckon, she agreed. She glanced around the clearing at all the dead men, then at him. "Yer powerful strong . . . an' yer smart," she said.

"We have things to do," Royal said. "First, I've got to bury these men. While I do that, tell youah children the plan we've made, seeing they undahstand that undah no circumstances are they to say anything but that I'm youah slave and you are on youah way to relatives. They ain't to cry any moah and they ain't to mention what happened heah, or mention the dead men. Not even theah fathah."

The woman nodded. "Yer right. That way, it'll be any-

how some time before it's known these men are dead, or how they was kilt. An' even then it won' be known who done it. It'll give us time to git started North."

"By then we'll have anothah in our party," Royal said. "You can claim her as youah wench."

The woman stared, then nodded.

"Have you something I can dig with?" he asked. "A shovel?"

"In the waggin. Merle," she called, "git out the big shovel an' give it to this . . . man. He goin' to berry the dead."

It was a surprisingly good shovel. Royal selected a spot at the edge of the clearing, set the lanterns for light and began to dig. The iron bit into the ground, deep and deeper, and the pile of soil which he flung to one side grew, became a mound, a hillock.

The boy Merle came to watch after he had received instructions from his mother. "Ye fixin' to berry 'em all in the same hole?" he asked.

"Yes," Royal replied, digging.

"My pa, too?"

"Him, too."

"Why?"

"It's the quickest," Royal explained.

"I kin see that . . . even if it is my Pa," Merle said. "I don' reckon it'd make any diff'rence to him . . . he's dead an' gone. What'll ye do when ye've finished?"

"Flatten it out," Royal explained. "It won't attract the attention regulah-size graves would."

"What'll ye do with the extry dirt? If ye mound it up, it'll still look like a great big grave."

"I'll scatter the dirt in the woods," Royal said. "Then I'll use some dry brush and sticks and rocks . . . not too thick. Just enough scattered about to covah the bare ground so anybody coming this way won't see it first glance. Theah ain't time for more. Theah may be othah men belonging to this party that'll be looking for them. We need to be gone befoah that happens and they come heah."

"Ma says ye saved our lives," Merle offered.

"That ain't certain," Royal replied. "But now we can help each othah."

"Ye wan' I should he'p fill the hole?"

"If theah's anothah shovel."

"I'll git it," Merle said, and ran for the wagon.

As he carried the bodies of the men, one at a time, to the burial pit and lowered them into it, Royal saw that the woman had straightened the contents of the wagon and that the two girls, no longer weeping, were sitting quietly beside their sleeping younger brothers.

While Royal arranged the bodies, Merle unsaddled the horses the four men had ridden, setting them free as Royal had instructed him to do. He brought the gear and all but one of the rifles to the pit and Royal deposited all this around the bodies.

When they had filled the community grave and camouflaged it, they tossed the left-over dirt over an area of the surrounding woods. At Royal's direction, Merle turned back to the wagon with the shovels.

"I'm goin' to let my horse loose," he told the boy. "Get in the wagon—I'll be back."

Jungle-silent as before, he moved through the trees. Suddenly, off to his right, he glimpsed a figure melting through the woods toward the road. Stealthily he followed, but the figure was gone. He stood in shadow, listening. Moments passed. Then the sound of a horse's hooves rang on the road beyond, died away.

Thoughtfully Royal made his way to his horse. He wondered if the rider had been the white man who had left the poor-white's shanty in a rage.

His horse was where he had left it, moving restlessly. He unsaddled, slipped off the bridle, slapped the animal on the rump. It loped away through the woods.

He hung his saddlebags across his shoulders, lifted the gear and started toward the wagon. On the way, he located a clump of undergrowth and here he stowed saddle and bridle, tugging bushes until the gear was hidden and no one, going through the woods, would spy it.

Back at the clearing he retrieved his rifle and headed for the waiting wagon.

"We've got to move out," he told the woman. "Keep to the woods. Theah's people on the roads."

CHAPTER SEVEN

He laid his saddlebags on the wagon bed, covered himself with a quilt, then told Merle and the girls to sit on him. "If we meet anyone, this may hide me," he explained. "Weah too close to dangah for you to try to pass me off as your slave."

The children got into place, pulling a small, sleeping boy close to Royal on either side for further concealment of his great figure. Then he heard the woman slap the reins against the horse's backs and say in a low tone, "Giddap! Giddap ther! Merle, keep yer eye on the cow!"

The wagon strained and creaked, began to move, its wheels loud. The wheels hit sticks and small stones and depressions, sending tremors through the frail wooden vehicle.

Royal listened through wagon sounds, horse sounds and those of the cow, alert for first whisper of pursuit. No one spoke or moved. The children sitting on him did not shift position. He became aware of the tremor of their stiff bodies and knew why they did not move. They were terror-stricken.

On the noisy wagon crept, bumping and bouncing. Royal breathed as quietly as he could, so he could listen. They might be stopped by patrollers scouring the woods alongside the road or they might be found by that fellow who had gone skulking through the trees.

"Watch foah a field with a haystack," he whispered.

"I'm watchin'," the woman whispered back.

Once he had filled the wagon with hay and concealed himself, the children on top of him, they could risk daylight travel. Later on, with both Princess and himself hidden under the hay, the five children on top of them,

the woman could head North. Only when they were many miles toward the North could they dare pass themselves off as the white woman's slaves, with Royal walking to relieve the team. Meanwhile, the heavy load would slow the horses but they would make some progress. He hoped and believed that few patrollers or bounty hunters would stop the equipage of a woman and five children to search for two runaway slaves.

As they wound through the woods, Royal ventured in whispers to discuss plans with the woman. "I saw a map the shoemaker at Hunnicutt Hill had," he whispered. "I believe we go straight north from the New Orleans area into Mississippi, north up the length of Mississippi, north up the width of Tennessee and from there into Illinois. From that state, we can strike freely east and north to Boston."

"Yes," the woman whispered.

"Unless," he warned, "a man I saw sneaking through the woods spotted us—and reports it—we may have a chance."

"What man?" the woman whispered.

"It might be the one rode away from your farm mad," Royal whispered. "Aftah Mistah Hunnicutt arrived."

Whispering, the woman related how Hunnicutt had dismissed the man, whose name was Derrick. She believed Derrick had been deceived, if he had been trailing them, because of the manner in which Royal was hidden in the wagon and because his horse was gone.

"We got on'y the cow trailin' the waggin."

"Derrick might know wheah the wagon stopped," Royal reasoned. "If he goes theah, he'll find signs of fighting and find that grave-pit. If he does all that, and gets the idea I'm with you, he'll see to it I'm blamed foah the killings."

"Ye bes' hol' a rifle," the woman whispered.

"No," he decided. "If white men should come upon us, we'll have to use ouah plan of you being the mistress and me the slave. And a slave ain't permitted to carry firearms, Ma'am."

"Don' call me that!" she whispered fiercely. "Call me by my name . . . call me Mercy!"

"It ain't done between slave and mistress," Royal refused.

"Pleasel" the woman insisted, whispering louder. "I ain' yer mistress . . . I'm a woman an' yer a man, an' I got a cravin' fer ye to call me by my name when we's alone with jus' the chillen."

"Whatevah you say . . . Mercy," Royal whispered, giving in both because he felt sympathy toward her and to quiet her.

"Whut's yer name?" she asked.

"Royal."

"That's a odd name . . . a nice name. An' take back thet gold ye paid Zeb," she whispered. "An' the thousan' Mister Hunnicutt paid. Yer to be the man in our doin's . . . do the man plannin' an' the man fightin' . . . like ye done a'ready. It's fittin' ye should han'le the money."

"You'll have to keep the gold, Mercy," Royal whispered. "You'll have to lay claim to it, say it's all youahs. It won't even do foah you to leave the thousand Mistah Hunnicutt paid, even if you feel you ain't got any right to it."

"Why not?" she demanded.

"Because it would be a clue," Royal whispered, "that the woman seen traveling with five children might be the mothah of the wenches Mistah Lee Hunnicutt bought. And that would be enough to put the patrollers and bounty hunters on ouah trail. Anything that rouses anybody's suspicions will make them at least want to question you. And if they stop the wagon, unless I have time to get out and hide first, they'll discovah me. And it's too soon . . . we're too close to Hunnicutt Hill foah you to try to pass me off as youah slave."

"Ye right, I reckon," conceded Mercy.

They drove on, the wagon toiling through the trees. The children now shifted position frequently and he knew they were growing very tired. He studied the dark sky, which was not quite so dark as before.

"Mercy," he whispered, "watch foah a good camping place. One that is well concealed and not too far from watah, wheah we can hide until dark."

"I was thinkin' the same," Mercy whispered. "I bin watchin'. The trees is gittin' thicker, an' the way they growin' ahead yonder, looks like they follow a stream, the way trees does."

The wagon labored on. It slowed but kept moving, the ground rougher, the jolt of the wheels harder. At last the wagon stopped.

"Ye kin set up now," Mercy said. "Seems it's safe enough. You chillen git off'n him now."

Royal waited until the youngsters had scrambled off him and jumped out of the wagon. Cautiously he sat up, pushing away the quilt with which he had been covered. They were at the edge of a very small clearing thickly ringed by trees and undergrowth.

"What ye think?" Mercy whispered.

"Looks fine," he replied. "I'll scout around."

He stepped out of the wagon and moving with silent speed, circled the clearing. He made cautious forays into the forest on all sides, finding no sigh of the presence of man. To the south some distance through the trees, he found a cold, fast-running stream and knelt and drank from it.

To the west, he came upon a field where three haystacks humped darkly toward the sky. He returned to the wagon, motioning the children back into it.

"Drive west through the trees," he told Mercy softly. "You can make it if youah careful. I've found ouah hay."

He had her drive the wagon right alongside the field. "You'd bettah stay with the little children, Mercy," he said when she had reined in. "The rest of us will get the hay. It won't take long, four of us working."

Moving fast, they gathered up armloads of the good-smelling hay, tossed it into the wagon, returned for more. By the time they had finished and driven back to the clearing, the two small boys, awakened by the activity, were crying softly.

"Hesh, now," Mercy comforted. "Yer Ma's goin' ter fix grub . . . don' cry! Yer big brother's goin' ter milk the cow, too." She turned to Royal. "Ye reckon I kin build up a little fire? I could cook grits an' pone to go with the milk."

Royal considered. "I think so," he decided. "Cook enough that with what you've got from yesterday, we can eat it cold. So we don't risk making any cook-smoke when folks can see it."

Mercy set the girls to keeping their brothers quiet and Merle to gathering sticks and wood. While he was doing this, Royal lighted the lanterns and set them so their light would not shine into the woods and Mercy got out her meal and grits and pans. While Merle milked the cow, Royal made the fire and Mercy mixed her pone, using some of the fresh milk for that purpose.

Royal watched her graceful movements in the light of the fire and lanterns. She noticed his eyes on her and asked, "Whut ye starin' at? Tell me true, like we're equals . . . 'cause we are equals, Royal."

"Youah a beautiful woman," he told her honestly. "Bearing children has put beauty through you. It's a pleasuah to watch you move about."

"I reckon that's the bes' compliment I've had sence Tintin," she said. "If ye got more nice words like them, I'm willin' to hear 'em any time."

"You mustn't forget, Mercy," he reminded her, "that Southern gentlemen don't like foah their women to help runaway slaves."

"I ain't never had no truck with a Southern gent'man . . . 'cept Mister Hunnicutt that my husban' made me pester with," Mercy replied. "'Course my husban' was looked on by my overseer Pa as white-trash. I never wanted Zeb, not when my Pa married me off to him. He never onct let off throwin' it up to me about the girls havin' black blood. Now that he's kilt, I ain't mournin'. I figger I got a right to do what I want an' what I think is best fer my chir'ren."

"It may be true," Royal told her, "that you've got no

Southern gentleman in youah family but it's the othah Southern men you've got to considah. No white man in the South will tolerate any white woman helping a run-away slave escape from his mastah."

"I reckon I understan' that," Mercy agreed. "But I got to take my chances . . . I got to do what I see fit and deal with Southern gentlemen if the time comes."

They fell into silence. When the pone and grits were cooked, they all ate together, washing down the hot food with foaming, fresh milk. If any of the children mourned for Zeb Sproul, there was no sign of it. The two girls, whose names Mercy told him, moved closer to Royal and gazed at him admiringly.

Being in such intimate contact with three lovely, nubile females stirred Royal in spite of himself. He now explained in detail to Mercy exactly where the bulk of the Hunnicutt gold was buried near her old shanty-house. He described the tree at the foot of which it rested and she said she thought she knew which tree it was.

"If anything happens to me," Royal said, "get the gold and take it to Boston. The mistress will be in front of a waterfront restaurant called The Clam. On Sunday mornings, she'll be there. If she and Princess get through."

"What do I do if I meet 'em?"

"Give the gold to the mistress. She'll give you enough to keep you and the children. If you tell her I made you this promise."

"I'll do what ye say," Mercy agreed.

Dawn was in the sky. Royal listened into the dark morning. All was quiet. "We'd bettah sleep now," he said. If all goes well, we can stay heah until dark, then move on as far as we can befoah daylight again."

Merle put out the fire, scattering the ashes. The girls wrapped the supply of food and stowed it in the wagon and Mercy settled the little boys on the hay. At her direction, the girls and the older boy also got into the wagon to sleep.

Mercy reached over and took Royal's hand. Her touch

was warm; again he felt stirred by her lush body. As though entranced, he let her lead him into the trees but when she trailed her hands down his arms and placed her body against his, he stepped away.

"It won't do, Mercy," he said gently. "It ain't for a white woman and a black man like me . . . a man who is all black . . . to have . . . to kiss . . . to pestah. It ain't like it was with Tintin . . . he was almost white."

"I've had two white men now, my husban' an' Mister Hunnicutt," Mercy argued. "An' the one that raped me . . . that makes three. An' I had Tintin, an' he was the real one, the on'y one . . . until you. I figger that after all the years with Zeb an' the time with Mister Hunnicutt an' the man you kilt, I got the right to have what I re'lly want."

"We must go to the wagon," Royal said gently. "The children shouldn't be alone."

She nodded and he led back to the clearing, listening for any stir of enemy, hearing only the soft move of her bare feet as she followed. Wordlessly, she took two quilts from the wagon, tossed one to Royal and crept beneath the wagon with the other, which she rolled into a sort of pillow for her head.

"Lay close," she begged. "I'll feel safer."

Accordingly, Royal folded his quilt into a pillow and stretched out perhaps a foot from her. He listened into the silence. There was the sound of the water running yonder and the early bird calls. Nothing else. After a time, the quiet in the wagon told him that the children, worn out by shock and terror and travel, were asleep.

But Mercy was not asleep. Though she lay with eyes closed, he could feel warmth emanate from her, and a pulsing awareness. He could hear her soft, irregular breathing, could sense her throbbing want.

She was within reach, he thought, and she was willing. She hungered for what he had to give as all women seemed to hunger.

Now she turned on her side, eyes opening to meet his, her hand on his upper arm. They gazed into each other's

eyes and then her hand began to stroke his arm. Gradually it worked downward, across his belly, lower.

Her fingers tugged at his trousers and his organ leapt forth, erect and turgid. She grasped it in her hand, circling it with her fingers.

"This is better, ain't it, Royal?" she murmured.

He said nothing. He was keenly aware of her hand, the sweet feel of her breath against his black skin and the warmth of her thighs through her dress as they tightened around his left thigh.

Despite his wish to avoid becoming intimate with Mercy Sproul, Royal could not control his rising desire. He was a Mandingo prince, king, emperor.

Ever since he had been a young boy, he had bedded many girls. It meant much to the Mandingo girl to belong first to royalty, added to her allure for Mandingo men. Royal also had many wenches at Hunnicutt Hill, where he had been kept as stud. He had Princess, his love. He had Lida, Lee Hunnicutt's cousin, who was perhaps the most exciting of all women. And he had Frances Hunnicutt, the mistress, Lee Hunnicutt's bride, who had hungered for and needed him; he had comforted her with his body. And when Lida had taken him to the whorehouse in New Orleans and leased him out to the Madam, he had the white Madam, who had taught him many sex-tricks. There, too, he had serviced old white women who had been starved for sex and who had paid Madam for his services. Madam in turn had paid him a salary.

When he had fled from the whorehouse, he'd had the white whore in the crib. She it was who had arranged for his fake freedom paper.

Now he had still another white woman—this one. And for the first time the decision whether or not to take her was his to make. Royal decided that since he was temporarily free he had some rights; he did not have to consort with this white woman if he did not wish to do so.

When his white master had ordered him to pester a wench, it had been his obligation as the slave to obey.

Royal had done as ordered, all the while making secret plans to escape and return to his empire in Africa. When Frances Hunnicutt had beseeched him to give her comfort, he had been obliged to comply because she had helped Princess through her miscarriage. When Lida, the master's cousin, had demanded his love, he had to consent because he was escaping and she would turn him in if he refused. When the Madam in New Orleans had told him to pleasure her or one of her fat old women customers, he'd had to obey because there was a price on his head and she'd been hiding him. When the white whore in the crib had wanted his love, he'd been forced to give in for the same reason.

Bad things had befallen him after he began to cover white women, always against his will or his better judgment. After he had given the white mistress love, he'd had to run, leaving Princess behind, very ill. After love with Lida, he'd been incarcerated in the whorehouse. Escaping the whorehouse, he'd been forced to kill his first white man.

Then, when he had kidnaped Princess, the overseer, Slocum, had been killed, a young white plantation owner had been killed, and Lida, who had given him such pleasure, had also been killed. But Lida had stolen the master's gold and set him free. If his present condition could be termed freedom.

He considered the sex he'd had with all the white women and could not understand why the white women wanted him. He had never made advances to any one of them, yet they had all seduced him by means of blackmail or appeal to his sense of obligation.

Royal had thought all these things in a flash, in no longer time than it took Mercy's hand to stroke up and down his throbbing organ five or six times. She was sending tremendous surges of desire through his great body. Though he had thought it out in detail and though he knew it was far from wise for him to indulge with her, the hunger in him craved her arms. When that hunger clawed at the very depths of him, he turned on his side

and held her, letting his hand slide up under her dress and caress first one bare, smooth, warm buttock and then the other. He let his hand wander to her mound and cover it, large and rounded and moist and moving against his palm, moving and seeking, ever moving.

Suddenly she gasped, pushing away. When he reached to draw her back, she shook her head. "Clo'es," she whispered, so only he and not the sleeping children could hear, "le's take 'em off."

She came from under the wagon and quickly they stripped. She went back under the wagon and opened her arms. Encircling each other, they made love overtures. She stroked his naked belly, his manhood. His hands held both ample rounds of her buttocks, his fingers probed the entrance to her womanhood. The scent of her filled him, mingled with the dawn smell of the forest. He lifted her body until it was prone above him. He buried his face against the springy, generous surge of her breasts and tasted them, honey-sweet, the nipples rigid, the beat of her heart above him faster with every movement of his mouth.

She threw her legs apart, straddling him, the white curves of her nude buttocks rotating. Suddenly he felt her encompass him and she moaned and fell upon him, her nails digging into his hard, straining neck as she eased herself up and then fully down; she cried out softly, moaning with happy pain.

He knew the massive size of him filled her as no other man could ever have filled her. He could feel himself swell further, within her, as she kept driving up against the power of his punching hips. Up she drove, to the extremes of her sheath and she cried out once, the sound muted.

Now Royal was helpless to do aught but what he must. He felt his great hands encompass her buttocks like warm blankets. He punched with his buttocks, reaching her depth with each punch, bouncing back from it, punching again. Over and over. She pounded back, meeting every onslaught, her breath knocked softly

out each time, caught in again as she pounded, knocked out again. The harder he punched, the harder she pounded. She was a wild she-animal riding him; he had to quell her, to relieve that which she was rousing in him, that which she was sending into unbearable, swelling distension.

He didn't breathe now. His eyes were screwed tightly closed. There was only his bulbous, turgid organ ever punching for what it must have. He felt her reach her sobbing, thrashing release. And in the midst of it, his passion burst into her, poured through her, and he was swept with such glory and thunder as he had never known.

He lay still, with her atop him, her womanhood still sheathing, knowing that despite this, for him there was Princess. His empress would prevent him from ever becoming totally involved with Mercy.

For even if he were to lose Princess and were to love this white she-animal woman, as well he could, he knew it would never work. No matter where they went together—to the Northern states, to the Orient or South America—nowhere would people tolerate a black husband and a white wife. Nor could he take her to Mandingo-land as empress, for he was obligated to take an empress from among the tribes. Princess had a white father, true—but he was king of a tribe, having been rescued and adopted by Princess' grandfather, who was then king. No, Royal's people would resent Mercy as empress, would believe in their hearts that Royal had betrayed them and that he would not be able to serve them fully.

"Royal . . . darlin'," Mercy whispered. "Whut would ye do effen ye was captured?"

"I won't be taken," he replied. "I'll die first."

"That ain't smart," she argued. "Whut kin ye do, dead?"

He didn't reply. There was no way to explain to her. To Mercy, caught in the web of life as a mere child, sold to Sproul to save her father disgrace, she was accus-

tomed to doing what she must do, just to live. She had submitted to Sproul, had borne him three sons, had taken his abuse regarding her daughters. She had let Sproul sell those daughters to Hunnicutt. She had submitted her body to Hunnicutt when her husband so ordered. She had submitted easily when the white man raped her yesterday; a Mandingo girl would have died fighting the rapist. But Mercy knew and believed that it was more important to stay alive than to believe in ideals. She accepted her lot in life. She did the best she could from moment to moment. She did what was necessary to keep living and to keep her children living.

Perhaps, Royal thought, holding her lush, she-animal body close atop his own great frame, Mercy's way was best, after all. Perhaps he himself was following her way. But only to a point, he realized. For he still preferred death to capture.

Her sheath still encompassed him; he was half-tumescient. She began to move in a gentle, then ever-wilder rotating motion. And this time, when they reached the wonder point for which they struggled and strove, they both cried out—aloud and joyously.

"Ma," called Suzan. "You woke me an' Noele up. What ye doin', Ma?"

CHAPTER EIGHT

They tumbled apart, staring at each other. Consternation swept Mercy's face. Then, as Suzan called again, "Ma . . . ?" the consternation was replaced by wide-eyed excitement. Royal reached for his clothes but Mercy caught his arm.

"Suzan," Mercy said quietly. "Ye an' Noele wait a minit? I wan' to speak to Royal fu'st."

"Then we kin git down?" asked Suzan.

"Likely," Mercy replied. "Min', now!"

She held Royal's arms, held his eyes, began to whisper. "Ye the bes' man fer pesterin' that ever lived! It ain' often a Ma kin give her daughters the best of anythin' . . . not a Ma like me, married to white-trash . . . 'specially when her girls is part-colored. Ain' that right, Royal . . . ain' it?" She shook at his strong arms and he let her move them a bit.

"I reckon that's right," he agreed. "In this tribe of Louisiana . . . the way things are."

"Some day my girls is goin' ter be pestered," Mercy continued. "By some man like Mister Hunnicutt . . . er some white-trash like Zeb . . . er by their husban's effen they pass fer white an' git husban's. Ain' that right?"

Royal nodded. His neck was beginning to prickle; he was beginning to sense what she wanted of him.

"Ye goin' ter make me come right out an' say it?" she cried. "Well, I will . . . I'll say it! I want ye to deflower my daughters, Royall! Ye' an' nobody else! An' the reason I wan' fer ye to be the one, is I know f'um experience how wonderful ye are! I know ye'll be easy on 'em . . . that' ye'll bust 'em careful an' stretch 'em slow! I know ye'll show 'em how pesterin' kin be a joy an' a beauty in

the life of a woman!" She shook at his arms again. "Ye'll do it, Royal? Say ye'll do it!"

Suddenly the two young girls were there, down from the wagon, their eyes wide at their mother's nudeness, at Royal's naked body and great manhood. He looked up at them. They were slim and lovely. Where their mother's skin was milkwhite, theirs was touched with gold. Their hair, worn longer than hers, was tawny like hers but darker and fell in great, deep waves and big, gentle curls.

Again he was beseeched by a white woman to bestow his love. Inwardly he sighed. There was no way to say no; there was no reason to say no. Perhaps, in view of the fact that the mother was trying to help him escape to the North, he did not have the right to say no.

"Ye'll do it?" Mercy pressed.

"Do they want it?" he asked.

"Suzan . . . Noele?" The mother gazed eagerly from Royal to her daughters.

"Is it what ye did with him, Ma?" asked Noele.

"Yes," Mercy said with pride. "That's why I want him fer the two of ye. A man like Mister Hunnicutt ain' bad but it takes a 'sperienced woman fer him. Royal's so good at love no girl needs to know nothin' when he gits ahold of her."

"I reckon I wan' it, Ma," Suzan said. "I reckon I'm ready." She was staring at Royal's manhood, which had sprung erect and stood, quivering at right angles to his belly even though he was still sitting just outside the wagon. The organ was a mahogany colored staff rooted in the circle of black wool at his pelvis and even as it quivered it grew, and the tip stretched tight and shone.

Mercy and both girls were watching it, fascinated.

"Me too, Ma," Noele said and smiled shyly.

"Me fu'st," Suzan said. "I'm oldest."

"An' boldest," Mercy chided. "Watch that, girl."

"Ye bold yerse'f . . . all nekkid," Suzan teased.

"Ye seen me nekkid before," Mercy retorted.

"When we's swimmin'," Suzan said, teasing still.

Royal watched as the girls stripped off their bright dresses. Both had tender, up-tilted breasts. He looked at the sweet smallness of their waists, the enticing flow of hip and lovely, shapely legs. And his organ moved.

He hungered for the tender, sweet innocence of these girls. They were doubly attractive to him because of their black blood. His need for woman had even been like his need for food and sleep. These girls were the most succulent he had ever seen, even in Mandingo-land.

He stood. He held out his arms to Suzan and she came to him. He lifted her and strode to the other side of the clearing, went into the trees for privacy. He found a bed of soft moss and there he laid his treasure.

She lay on her back and smiled at him, in tender innocence, innocent joy, utter anticipation. "I like ye, Royal," she said.

He traced one full-budded breast, trailed his finger around the nipple, watched it rise. He caressed the other breast, tasted the nipple, sucked on it gently until she cried, half-sobbing, "O-h-h . . . I feel it pulling deep inside . . . pulling . . . do it some more!"

Instead, he followed every curve of her body with his hands, touching lightly, and watched her convulse with pleasure, her whole body moving luxuriously. She began to breathe in a gasping moan. And when he stroked her tender young mound, letting its tawn curls coil around his finger, drawing his finger lightly across her sex bud again and again, her delectable hips began to writhe, seeking for what she had never had.

Now, himself unable to wait longer, he parted her legs and positioned himself. He entered her cautiously, pressing gently in, waiting. And while he waited, he ran his tongue over her arching eyebrow, and she moaned with delight. He pressed further in, paused and let her become accustomed to his great size and then he pressed again, his organ going deeper, then he stopped. She was whimpering now, stroking his shoulders, urging him to proceed.

With a strong lunge he broke through the maiden-

head, expecting her to cry out, but she did not. She gasped and held her breath and as he again waited to give her time to grow accustomed to accommodating him, she half-sobbed, "What's next . . . what's next?"

He began to move, for indeed he could not much longer contain himself. She stirred beneath him; quickly he matched her first groping motion. As quickly she readjusted her motion to his. The motion was wide and slow and circular; it was his black belly on her golden-white belly, his black wool on her tawny mound, slowly circling, going fast and faster.

Her sheath was hot and moist and tight. His organ pounded and she pounded back and he went into a pumping motion. She was amazingly strong for a young girl; she lifted her hips off the moss and met him, stroke for stroke.

And when his passion broke, when it poured its hot stream to the depth of her sheath and all through her new womanhood, it was as though this had been the first time for him, too. His moan joined her sobs, binding them. After they had lain quiet, still joined, her sheath holding and pressing his organ, he put her away from him and sat up.

"Youah a lovely woman, Suzan," he said. "You'll make youah husband a very happy man."

"Couldn' ye be my husban', Royal?" she asked simply. "I got black blood, an' fer the fu'st time in my life I'm glad of it!"

"Fergit that talk!" Mercy's voice cut in, half-chidingly. "What'll Royal think? He's jus' doin' ye girls a favor . . . don' be teasin' fer whut ye cain't havel! Ye ready fer Noele, Royal?"

He stood up. "I reckon."

Noele came dancing up, nude and lovely and saucy. "I wan' my own tree!" she cried. "I picked it out . . . c'mon . . . I'll show ye!"

"They don' mean to be so bold," Mercy said. "They jus' saucy-like . . . Tintin was such a one. They git it nat'ral."

"I undahstand," Royal told her. "They're young . . . they're at the beginning of things . . . before their own troubles begin."

Noele seized his great hand with both of hers and danced alongside him, leading him to her very own tree. Suddenly she let go his hand and ran ahead and lay down on her own bed of moss.

"Am I doin' right?" she demanded, smiling at him, holding up her arms.

"Youah doing exactly right," he assured her and dropped to the moss. He kissed her brow, the bridge of her nose, her lips, her chin, the beating hollow of her throat. He trailed his lips down each breast, encircled one nipple, then the other, with his tongue. She wriggled and squealed and gasped and laughed and urged him not to quit, not ever to quit, it was such fun.

He ran his lips down her delicious belly, put the tip of his tongue into her navel. He wandered his tongue to her mound, to her sex bud, stroked and stroked. She cried out in joy; her shapely, tender hips began to work and she moved against his moving tongue. Suddenly her whole body stiffened, and he could feel the throb of that bud against his moving tongue.

"Royal . . . Royal . . . Royall" she moaned. "Is this it . . . oh, Royal . . . is it?"

At the end she gave a soft shriek and instantly, when he lifted his head, wanted more.

"Theah'll be more," he assured her, "but different . . . bettah."

He parted her legs, took position, inserted the swollen, pulsing tip of his penis into the mouth of her vagina and pushed. She pushed eagerly back, helping. Because her eagerness whetted him almost beyond control, he plunged through her maidenhead, hurting her, for she gave one shrill scream.

But then she was bucking under him like some wild little mating animal in the jungle and he was pumping with little consideration for anything but his own need.

"Do it hard!" she cried. "Hit that very place that yer tongue . . . oh . . . that's the place . . . now . . . now . . . !"

He could hardly hold her to the moss, young as she was. She had a wiry strength and a speed of movement he'd never found before. He rode her mercilessly and she bucked and whirled and twisted with no regard for him, all the time urging him to hurry, to make it like it was the other time.

And when it happened, when her body went stiff under the breaking of passion and his hot stream again burst forth, she screamed and laughed and called out his name, again and again. And when he finally managed to sit up and get her out of his arms, she was all over him.

"Do it ag'in, Royall" she begged. "Please do it ag'in! I ain't had enough!"

Once more Mercy intervened. "Ye've had all yer goin' to git, today or ever . . . fum Royal," she told her younger daughter firmly. "Fum the sound of it, ye had a mighty good time twict to yer sister's onct. This's jus' a favor Royal's did fer us . . . so's ye'll be ready-busted fer yer husban's. So's ye'll know ahead of time that there's pleasure to be had with yer man eff'n ye know how to git it, an' eff'n yer willin'. Now, git . . . git dressed like yer sister's done dressed, an' git back in that waggin an' git to sleep!"

Mercy herself was still naked. She came to Royal, put her smooth, lush body against his.

"Was it too bad?" she asked.

"Theah wonderful," he told her. "The best."

"Thank ye," she said. Then, simply, "Lay down with me heah, Royal. Pleasuah me."

Her hands were all over him, up and down, knowing, adept woman-hands. This was the woman from whose womb had sprung Suzan and Noele, little wild women such as he'd never had before. This was the woman those two would later become—full-blown, seductive, knowing.

He bore her down upon the bed of moss, sank himself

into her warmth, gloried in the smooth, unfaltering motion of her hips, in the strong, confident lifting of her body as she joined him in their sex-fight. And he all but lost himself in the breakers of passion which swept over them at the end.

Exhausted, he let himself fall asleep atop her.

Sometime, a small sound shattered sleep. He opened his eyes, about to throw Mercy aside and leap up. But the hard round steel of a rifle barrel pressed against his temple stopped him. His eyes focused in the new dusk of evening. He was surprised that he had slept for hours upon Mercy's nude body without being conscious of the passing of time. Somehow the day had escaped them.

"Stay still, nigger," a voice growled.

Royal turned his head, looked up, that rifle barrel prodding his temple.

Two white men were glaring down at them.

CHAPTER NINE

The second man jammed the muzzle of his weapon against Mercy's shoulder. "Ye nigger-lovin' white bitch!" he snarled. "Crawl out f'um under that black son-a-bitch an' set on yer hussy haunches!"

Mercy slowly moved from under Royal's body. "Mister Derrick . . ." she started to protest but received for her attempt a vicious prod with the rifle barrel. "Do whut yer tol', bitch," Derrick snarled viciously, lips drawn back from his teeth. "We'uns is goin' to learn ye a lesson ye is never goin' to fergit! A white woman fuckin' a black son-a-bitch nigger bastid! Us white gent'men is goin' ter fix ye good an' proper!"

The first man now poked Royal's head with the barrel of his rifle. "Set up!" he ordered. "You black son-a-bitch . . . after we makes ye watch whut we goin' ter do to thet whore-fuckin' woman, we goin' ter make ye sorry ye was ever borned."

Royal sat up. The man gave him a sharp poke between the shoulder blades, then stepped around and pointed the rifle at Royal's heart.

"Let the woman go," Royal said. "She had nothing to do with it—I raped her."

"That's a danged lie eff'n I ever heerd one!" snorted Derrick, still ramming his rifle barrel against Mercy's shoulder. "We bin here a spell, an' we seen ye snorin' away on top of her, an' her a-snoozin' under ye like a dang cat! We know yer thet runaway nigger they's a re-ward on . . . an' we goin' to c'llect thet re-ward! We seen how this bitch liked havin' you on top of her, how her hips'd twist an' move even whilst she 'us sleepin' . . . we seen 'nuff to turn our stomicks. We decent,

Christian Southern gent'men, an' we know what we got to do. Fust off, we goin' ter fix thet white whore-bitch fer pesterin' a nigger. Keep yer mouth shet, buck . . . yer betters had duties to pre-form!"

"Whut'll we do fu'st?" asked the man with the rifle on Royal.

"Truss him up," said Derrick. "Tie him to them little trees at the edge of the clearin' so's he kin watch what we goin' ter do ter the bitch."

"Crawl!" the other man ordered Royal. "Git on yer filthy han's an' knees an' crawl!"

Slowly, because now that rifle was gouging the small of his back, Royal did as he was told. Behind him, he could hear Mercy crawling and the white men walking. Nearer and nearer they drew to the designated trees.

There was no sound from the children in the wagon. Desperately Royal willed one of them to waken, to put a rifle on the white men long enough to divert their attention. If only the children could cause the slightest waver of the rifles, Royal could lunge, grab both men at once and topple them.

But there was nothing from the wagon. If the children were awake, they were cowering in terror.

"On yer belly, nigger!" Derrick called. "Feet to the trees . . . face to the clearin'. An' ye white bitch . . . on yer belly!"

Royal lay with his cheek on the ground, waited.

"Now," Derrick ordered his companion. "Whisson . . . fetch them strops we kerry on our saddles."

From where Royal lay, he could see the white man's boots as he strode away, hurried back. Only the sudden, hurting pressure of Derrick's rifle barrel between his shoulders kept him from reaching out and grabbing those ankles when Whisson passed, the straps dangling from his hand.

"Now," Derrick directed, "strop this son-a-bitch nigger's han's behin' his back. Real tight an' secure."

Royal felt the leather circle his wrists. Before Whisson pulled it tight, Royal instinctively tensed the muscles

down his arms and into his wrists, desperately willing the white men not to notice. Derrick gouged him with the rifle. "Hold on, Whisson!" he growled. "The son-a-bitch's tightenin' his muscles so's he kin work his han's free! Let go them muscles, nigger, er I'll kill yel!"

Royal complied, somewhat but not entirely relaxing his powerful muscles. He waited, the blood beginning to pound in his ears, to see if they would notice.

Whisson was pulling and yanking on the strap, grumbling. "He ain' let clear go," he growled. "Lookus them muscles . . . like iron bars under that black hide!"

"He got muscles that show no matter whut," Derrick replied. "Hurry up . . . git through with his han's. Pull the strop to the nex' hole . . . now fasten it. Nex' . . . spread-eagle him . . . strop one ankle ter thet little tree an' t' other ankle ter t'other tree."

While his ankles were being secured, Royal gradually relaxed his arms. To his satisfaction, the strap was not tight enough to cut into his flesh. Instead, there was enough play that he could work his wrists against it by tensing the muscles and pushing, but not now, not while the white men's attention was on him.

"Now he's done," Derrick said. "Haul the white bitch aroun' in front of him so's he kin see what happens ter a white woman in the South that pesters with a nigger."

Royal watched while the men spreadeagled Mercy on her back. She was crying softly, not asking for clemency, helplessly accepting what she could not escape.

The men drove four stakes into the ground, two at a distance from her head, two at a distance from her feet. They lashed her wrists and ankles to the stakes. When Whisson started to drive stakes into the ground at each side of her waist, Derrick intervened.

"We wan' her ter have some freedom of movement," he said. "Else we won' have no real fun."

There was a hushed, frightened sound from the wagon. Derrick went leaping over there, rifle ready. "Whole nest of pore-white brats here!" he yelled. "Couple fillies . . . got nigger musk on 'em! So all three the

white bastid bitch females has sported with this big, stinkin' stud!" he exulted. "Whisson, we got us a time ahead, learnin' three female whores whut happens ter white women in the South whut messes with a nigger!"

"Mastah," called Royal, using the title because he must, "the girls ain' white . . . theah wenches . . . octoroons. I forced the mothah, suh, then I forced the wenches."

"Shet up!" growled Whisson, kicking Royal in the face with his heavy-soled boot. "Ye ain' but a nigger . . . if we say the white females lowered theyse'fs to sport with a nigger, that's how t'was!"

A loud curse came from Derrick, at the wagon. Royal lifted his head in time to see the white man grab a rifle out of Merle's fist and toss it away. Then he hauled back his arm and hit the boy. Next he got the other weapons from the wagon and put them out of reach.

"This lil' white bastid 'us fixin' to shoot us!" he yelled. "Tie all these boys up . . . whilst I hold the rifle! Then spreadeagle the wenches like they Ma, one each side of her. I'll hol' the rifle 'til ye gits 'em all trussed an' tied."

Suzan and Noele were sobbing and trembling. Merle was ashen but dry-eyed. The two little boys were wailing, being not much more than babies. Then Derrick slapped in the mouth, ordering them to shut up. They continued to cry but quietly, their small bodies torn by sobs. Once their mother called softly to them, trying to comfort them, and Derrick told her to shut up or he'd come over and give her a kick.

After the boys were tied and the girls spreadeagled, Whisson built a fire and put water to boil. Derrick methodically gagged all the captives, Royal included.

"Whut's the idee?" Whisson asked.

"It ain' dark yit, but even when 'tis dark, we don' wan' nobody goin' 'long the road to hear no noise whilst we deal out punishmint," Derrick explained.

"It a piece to the road."

"'Tis that," Derrick agreed, "but noise kerries."

Now, with their attention on other matters, Royal kept

flexing his muscles and straining against the strap which bound his wrists. Again and again he flexed. The strap held, giving not a fraction, but he kept working at it, never letting up.

When the water boiled, Derrick lighted the lanterns from the wagon, set one at Mercy's head, and the other to one side so they could see what they were doing. "Seein' ye got yerse'f filled with nigger filth," Derrick told her, "we goin' ter wash out yer cunt . . . clean it fer ye. We goin' to scald out that nigger juicel"

Mercy was screaming behind her gag but the sound issued only as a smothered groan. Derrick and Whisson laughed as they filled a small pail with the scalding water.

"Put one han' under her butt," Derrick ordered his companion, "an' hol' her cunt open with t'other han'. I'll pore the hot water in with this dipper, slow an' careful . . . don' let her jerk . . . I don' wan' to scald ye."

"Yer givin' me the dang'rus job," Whisson grumbled. "Looks like it'd be safer fer me to set astraddle of her waist to hol' her down—ram a log under her butt an' let her position hol' her open."

"Git a log," Derrick agreed.

It didn't take long. Royal worked fiercely at his wrists but still the strap held as tightly as before. Mercy's hips were moving in a desperate attempt to free herself but it was no use. She was securely bound to her stakes. Whisson shoved the small log he brought under her hips, then straddled her stomach, facing Derrick.

It was at that instant Royal's wrist-strap gave, just a little.

"Git to it," Whisson said.

Carefully Derrick filled the dipper with boiling water, carefully poured it into Mercy's upheld, open vagina. Royal could see the muscles in her legs stand up. That was the only movement possible to her, other than her head, which she must be rolling from side to side. He couldn't see this, for Whisson blocked his view.

Royal knew she was screaming endlessly from behind

her gag, but the sound come only as a prolonged, anguished, breathless and endless groan. Her daughters, on either side, were screaming from behind their gags, and their combined, smothered sound was not as great as that of their mother.

"Watch her, ye nigger-bastid," commanded Derrick, refilling the dipper. "Watch whut pleasurin' a big black nigger is costin' her! Watch whut's in store fer ye, 'cept we goin' to let the master 'tend to ye . . . we goin' to c'lect the re-ward!" He poured the water into the tortured woman, refilled and poured, again and endlessly, until the pail was empty.

"Thet iron rod red-hot in the fire yit?" he asked Whisson.

The other man got off Mercy and went to the fire. "Yep," he reported.

"Wrap a rag 'roun' the cool end an' fetch it to me," Derrick ordered. When his companion had complied, Derrick stood in front of Royal, brandishing the red-hot iron. "Now watch whut else white men do to white bitch women whut consorts with nigger bastids!"

He strode to Mercy, whose head was rolling from one side to the other. "Bein' as how ye loves a nigger dick in ye," he told her, "I'll give ye somethin' better, that'll burn out any nigger-juice the hot water missed."

No, Royal tried to cry through his own gag, please no! But he could emit only a deep, choked groan. Mightily he worked at his bonds, feeling them go suddenly looser. Now he could twist his wrists within the straps, and he lay, twisting and fighting the bonds.

With a vicious thrust, Derrick rammed the red-hot iron up Mercy's vagina and beyond. The iron pierced through into her vitals, for it completely disappeared from view. There was the sweet smell of burning flesh. Derrick stood back and stared, as if in satisfaction. Her head flung violently to one side, then was still. She had lost consciousness; they could torture her no more, not until she was aware.

Royal kept twisting at his ever-loosening wrist strap.

He pulled first one foot, then the other, but this only tightened the ankle bonds. He worked steadily at the wrists, watching the white men as they prepared to punish the helpless young girls.

"Ye boys!" Derrick called across the little clearing. "Ye seen whut happens ter a white woman whut trucks with a nigger . . . now yer goin' ter see whut happens ter girls whut trucks with one! Ye nigger . . . don' ye quit watchin'!" he said, turning on Royal, who instantly stopped working his great, iron-strong wrists. "This is the way true Southern white gent'men feel 'bout their women messin' 'roun' with a nigger . . . this is the on'y result a bitch woman kin look forward to."

Working again at the straps, Royal watched. Derrick and Whisson used the hot water on the girls. Then they lashed them with a blacksnake whip, cutting their flesh. They were intent on the whipping when Royal got his hands free. While they bent over the girls to douse them a second time with the boiling water, Royal pulled the gag out of his mouth. He sat up and quickly freed his ankles.

Instinct told him to lie on his belly, hands behind his back, as if still tied. A breath after he had resumed this position, the men turned to the fire. They were testing two more iron rods and a can of water for a third hot bath as they had begun to call it. Waiting until they were intent upon their sadistic preparations, their backs to him, Royal got to his knees, gathered his muscles and gave a tremendous leap.

His body flew through the air, hurtled at the men bending over the fire. He struck them simultaneously, bearing them down into the licking flames, onto the hot coals, pressing them down into their own devil's fire with his strong, remorseless, naked body.

They howled and bucked. Royal clamped one great hand on the back of each neck, pushing their faces deep into the fire, drowning their yowls in flame. He held them so, his arms like iron, one knee deep into each back, strong and relentless. The heat was getting to him,

the flames eating into their clothes, catching, standing tall, and they were choking in fire and heat and coals.

Not until the flames from their clothes began to sear his own naked hide, not until he was sure they were well afire, did Royal let Whisson go. Then he rolled out of the fire, arms and legs wrapped around Derrick. The fellow struggled, screaming. Royal clamped his strong teeth onto the white throat and sank them until he felt the warm blood and tasted its salt. Then he sank them further, until he was on the windpipe and through it. Only after Derrick's body jerked and then lay still, did he jump up.

The other man was plunging and screaming blindly around the clearing; he was running, screaming flame. Royal dived for him, bringing him down. When the white man clawed up and fought, screaming hoarsely, Royal drew back his fist and hit him on the nape of the neck. The flaming body staggered forward, straight to the fire, fell across it. Royal grabbed the log from under Mercy's hips, put one end of it between Whisson's shoulders and pressed against the other end, holding him in the fire.

Whisson tried to move, tried to struggle. The flames wrapped him, stood tall. There was the smell of roasting flesh. When the erstwhile executioner was dead, Royal pulled his body out of the fire and, leaving it on the ground, turned to the woman.

His skin was stinging and tortuous where the flames had touched it but he went about what he had to do. He freed Mercy but it was too late for Mercy. She had died with her eyes open and agonized.

Suzan and Noele were both unconscious. He carried first one, then the other to the wagon, laid them gently on the hay. He freed the boys, lifting the little ones into the wagon.

"My Ma's dead, ain' she?" asked Merle, his voice thin. "Them men kilt her."

"Don't let youah brothahs make noise," Royal told the lad. "I've got to bury youah Ma and the othahs."

Again he dug a common pit. Mercy he wrapped in a quilt. The white men he buried as they were. He put the men's saddles into the pit, and all firearms save a rifle and a pistol. He kept two knives, one for himself and one for Merle. It would be best if they could keep the men's horses and the wagon team to ride but the girls had to be moved in the wagon, so reluctantly he turned the saddle horses loose.

He filled the pit, again scattering the excess soil in the woods. Merle helped, tense and silent, not weeping. Royal concealed the pit as best he could, stomped out the fire, scattered the ashes, flung the iron rods, the straps, the bucket and cans and lanterns into the wagon.

These bodies must not be found, for sooner or later he would be blamed not only for killing the two white men, but for the brutal slaying of the white woman, as well. He would be hunted the way his tribe hunted a killer in the jungle, remorselessly, with the intent to kill, to execute.

While Merle hitched the team, Royal took all of Mercy's gold and put it in the saddlebags. These he concealed beneath the hay under the wagon seat. Finally he got back into his clothes.

With Merle beside him on the seat, he shook the reins over the horses' backs. They leaned into their collars and the wagon began to move, bumping slowly over the rough woods terrain.

Now certain that Derrick had followed him and the wagon, Royal hoped the white man had not told any whites, other than Whisson, that he was tracking a runaway slave. For if Derrick had told, and he may well have done so, the entire area would at this moment be crawling with patrollers and bounty hunters.

"Giddap," Royal said to the laboring team, "giddap."

It never entered his mind to abandon the five children. Even though his life was at stake. Even though, should Lee Hunnicutt capture him, he would surely devise infinitely worse torture for Royal than that which Derrick

and Whisson had wreaked upon Mercy and her daughters.

Both girls were moaning and sobbing, though they gave no evidence of being aware of where they were or where they were going.

CHAPTER TEN

After almost two hours of creeping through the timberland, the wagon hitting every bump, Royal outlined to Merle what they were going to do next. "Since we've seen nothing and heard no pursuit in this length of time," he said, "we'll travel the back road toward Hunnicutt Hill. I'll hide undah the hay, and you lay the two little fellahs on me to sleep and help conceal me."

"What 'bout Suzan an' Noele?" the lad quavered.

"They'll stay where they are, at the back of the wagon," Royal replied. "If youah stopped and if you have to ansah questions, say youah sisters were raped by a big Negro who rode away horseback and that youah on youah way to youah parents. Theah ain't much chance anybody will doubt what you say. Youah sistahs are too sick to talk and the little boys are too young to betray anything."

Cautiously Royal drove the horses through the early night, winding through timber. When he came to a little moonlit road leading in the general direction of Hunnicutt Hill, he reined up and stretched out on the bottom of the wagon under the hay. As directed, Merle laid the heavily sleeping little boys on top of him.

"Drive onto the road . . . follow it to the right," Royal said. "Keep watch for anything on the move—horsemen, men on foot, wagons, carriages—anything at all."

"I'll do it," Merle promised. There was a small vibration in the wagon boards as the boy got back onto the seat.

The going was smoother now, though the wagon still hit every dent and creaked and moaned in the night. On

they went, and on. The little boys slept; there was no sound from Suzan and Noele, not a stir.

"Whut's goin' to become of us kids?" Merle asked. "Pa an' Ma is dead, an' the girls is sick. They goin' to die?"

"I don't know," Royal replied. "Not if I can keep them from it."

"Where we goin'—right to that Hunnicutt Hill place?"

"I don't know that for suah either," Royal said.

His immediate objectives were first to elude any possible network of pursuers, then to help the tortured, unconscious girls. He realized that he could use the white children for cover and at the same time help them. For no one knew as yet that the runaway slave was traveling with five youngsters. The only two men thus far to have learned this now lay dead and buried in a common grave with Mercy, whom they had murdered.

Thus Royal's safety was ensured, at least for the moment.

Nevertheless, unease assailed him. The wool on his neck crawled, the way it had done in the jungle when an enemy had been on the prowl for him. He felt increasingly sure the wagon was being followed. Lying under the hay, he listened deeply, heard nothing but the horses' hooves on the road, the turn of the complaining wheels, the creaking of the wagon bed.

He moved the small boys off him, pulled out his gold-filled saddlebags, hung them around his neck, put a knife into his belt and lifted his rifle. "We may be followed," he whispered to Merle. "It ain't safe foah me to stay with you. Drive to Hunnicutt Hill and go to the plantation house if I don't catch up to you."

"Whut'll I do there?" whispered the boy.

"Ask foah the mistress," Royal whispered back. "She'll help you."

As the wagon toiled through a black pool of shadow on the road, Royal melted into the edge of the timber and crouched. The wagon crept on, creaked out of hearing. Royal waited.

He heard the voices from far behind this spot. They

were loud and angry, and they grew louder and angrier as three horsemen appeared around the bend, riding at a walk, drawing nearer to the stretch of road near which Royal was hiding.

"Somethin's wrong," one man yelled, "thet with sech a wide-spread slave hunt an' sech a big re-ward fer the runner, he ain' bin foun'! Where-at ye think we goin' ter c'llect any re-ward follerin' that broke-down waggin ye claim ye seen enterin' the road? Tell me thet!"

"I ain't argyfyin' with yel" yelled a second voice. "Whut we need to un'nerstan' is why Derrick an' Whisson didn' fin' this waggin! Where is them two fellers, anyhow?"

"I say we go look fer 'em!" the first man shouted. "I bin sayin' it! What'd the nigger be doin' with the waggin, anyhow?"

"He's got gold . . . lots of gold!" said a third man, whose voice was deeper and heavier and louder than any of the others. "He apt to be mos' any place doin' anythin'. We this clost to the waggin, I say we ketch up to it an' take over eff'n it looks sus-picious!"

"How we know Derrick an' Whisson ain' ketched the nigger an' made off with the gold?" yelled one.

"We goin' to ketch that waggin," decreed the heavy voice.

Still yelling, they kicked their horses into a lope and went galloping after the wagon.

Royal moved deeper into the woods. When the men found only children in the wagon, they'd ride on. It was much too soon for him to trail them, however. For, as slowly as the wagon progressed, it could not have gone far.

Time passed, and more time. He listened for sounds from the wagon and heard none. He reconnoitered behind and around himself but there was nothing.

Suddenly he was afraid for the children. Rifle ready, he moved to the edge of timber and began to trot in the direction the others had gone, the saddlebags moving

heavily against his chest. He was as concerned for the safety of the children, he realized, as for his own.

Ahead shots rang out and cries mounted the night.

Royal ran faster. The woods slowed him. He sprang onto the road and went sprinting for where it curved ahead under moonlight. As he pounded around the bend, the horsemen were streaking along the road, away from the wagon.

Never breaking stride, Royal raced on.

The wagon was wrecked, thrown over on its side, two wheels off, hay strewn about. The team was gone and the cow was missing. The girls had been flung out, as had the littlest boy. All three were dead. Merle and the other little boy were nowhere to be seen.

He must have run the horses to get this far, Royal thought. The lad must have been terrified even before the attack.

"Merle," he called softly, "you heah? You can come out now . . . it's me . . . it's Royal."

There was movement from the woods. Merle stepped into the moonlight, leading his small brother.

"Billy an' me hid," he quavered. "Them men kilt Suzan an' Noele an' Hinry . . . shot 'em daid! They tore up the waggin' cause they couldn' fin' no gold in it. They 'us sure they'd be gold in the waggin!"

"How about the horses?"

"They took 'em . . . the cow run off."

"Take Billy and hide," Royal directed, rummaging in the wreckage for the shovel he had already used twice. "I'm going to dig another grave. After that we'll go on, the three of us."

When it was finished, Royal swung the four-year-old Billy into his arms. Carrying his rifle, he began walking through the timber along the road, Merle trailing him, knife in his belt.

Now, Royal pondered as he walked, the three white men knew about the wagon load of white children. If they were to spy a Negro walking with two white chil-

dren, knowing two were missing from the wagon, they would assume the Negro was the runaway slave and that he had the gold they were after. They'd try to capture him, steal the gold, and in addition collect the reward offered for him. Other than those three men, however, no one else would presently guess that Royal might be traveling with two white boys.

The men would not be quick to tell anyone else, because they wanted all the gold and all the reward. Thus, even though Merle and Billy added to Royal's burden at the moment, they also continued to contribute to his safety. In addition to this, he felt responsible for them and meant to get them to Frances Hunnicutt.

"If we are stopped," he instructed Merle, "I'm youah slave, taking you to youah grandmothah."

"I ain' got a gran'mother."

"They won't know that," Royal told him. "And if anybody should find out I've got this gold, remembah to tell them it's youahs. It's being taken to youah grandmothah . . . for you and youah little brothah."

"But we re'lly goin' to Hunnicutt Hill?"

"That's right. The mistress will take care of you. She'll see you started on a good future."

They walked on through night woods.

And Royal knew, as they walked, that when the three horsemen returned, they would backtrack the wagon to the clearing. And when they did that, they would find the grave of Derrick and Whisson and Mercy.

And the hue and cry for Royal, killer slave, would grow hotter.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

For three days Royal had been watching the expanse of Mississippi River between the abandoned Negro shack and Hunnicutt Hill. He was awaiting an opportunity to make a break for the other side. Just over there was Princess and safety for the two white boys in his charge.

Until now he had been unable to cross the river because of the armed white men who were patrolling the road and watching the river and its environs. Merle had stolen out each night, creeping through tall grass and reeds, and made his way to a tavern a half mile from the shack. There he had hung around in the shadows, on the fringes of the gathered men, and listened. If anyone asked him what he was doing there, Royal had instructed him to say he was with his Pa, learning firsthand how to be a bounty hunter, but nobody had noticed the quiet young boy enough to question him.

Thus he brought to Royal the information that word had gone far and wide, spreading greed like a plague, that the fugitive buck was in the neighborhood, supposedly carrying gold specie which he had stolen from Lee Hunnicutt. In addition to the ten thousand dollar reward on the buck's head, there was now posted a ten percent bounty for the recovery of the forty-seven thousand dollars in gold which he had stolen. This enticing news had attracted patrollers from miles away as well as bounty hunters and no-accounts who were more interested in recovering the gold than in trying to catch a Negro who was reputed to be a giant and a killer. To make matters worse, the militia had been alerted because the fugitive had allegedly murdered at least five white men and

maybe more, whose bodies were then being sought. Merle further reported that the men at the tavern said Hunnicutt didn't want the militia to catch his runaway, that he wanted to mete out his own punishment, not let the law of the country do it.

"They all figger," Merle whispered in the darkness, "thet Mister Hunnicutt wants ter torture ye an' kill ye hisse'f bad 'nuff he'll give anyone brings ye to him private an extry thousan' dollars in gold, mebbe more."

Royal considered their situation. When Merle offered him stolen carrots, though Royal had not eaten in the three days and hunger was wild in him, he pushed the boy's hand gently aside. "Save it foah you and youah brothah," he said. "Keep youah strength up foah the time when we run again."

"I et in the fiel'," Merle insisted. "Then I stashed carrots in one pocket fer Billy, an' some in t'other fer ye."

Royal thought of the gold in his saddlebags. But it was unsafe to give Merle even one gold coin with which to buy food, lest it bring attention to him. Their suspicions, if roused, could lead the patrollers eventually to this semi-roofless shack which they had searched and found vacant and had since ignored. During their search, Royal and the boys had crouched in the swamp, mud oozing over their bodies, heat bearing soddenly upon them, mosquito-ridden and miserable.

"We'll sleep," Royal told Merle now. "I'll take the first watch."

"Let me," the lad insisted. "I kin watch all night . . . 'cause I kin sleep off'n on all day whilst ye hide in the swamp, an' ye have ter keep awake then. Billy I kin tie to a post, an' eff'n he starts to bawl er make noise, I'll wake right up an' hesh him afore he pulls any notice f'um them patrollin' er anythin'."

"When it's daylight," Royal told Merle, not for the first time, "take Billy and cross the rivah to the plantation. Some boatman'll take a couple of boys like that."

Merle refused, this too not for the first time. "I'm askeered ter try it," he said. "I feel safer with ye . . . an'

anyhows I kin he'p ye. I kin lissen out at the tavern an' keep ye knowin' what they plottin'."

Royal felt a pang of gratitude strike through his hunger-wracked body for this white boy's loyalty and trust. Merle could turn him in, could claim the reward. At the very least, he could ensure his own safety and that of his brother.

"Youah a man, Merle," Royal whispered. "Lay down now and sleep. I'll stand first watch, like I said. Long as youah with me, I'm in charge."

He heard the boy obediently bed down beside his brother. He moved to the window opening which faced the river and peered keenly through the darkness for any moving, skulking, tracking shadow. Presently he went to a window facing toward the tavern and stared searchingly into night for whatever he might see. His ears strained for any sound other than breeze in tall grass, the frog chorus from the swamp. He kept on the move, from side to side of the shack, during the hours of his watch.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Lee Hunnicutt was leading a private posse of friends, combing and recombining a confined area. It was late evening, and the thick gray light was rapidly going into darkness.

Much to his chagrin, the countryside was alive with searchers, patrollers, possees and bounty hunters, to say nothing of the army of ne'er-do-wells on the scene hoping to collect the reward and the bounty on the gold and become rich overnight. Over and above this was the efficient, relentless militia.

Hunnicutt wanted Royal taken, no two ways about it. But he wanted the buck returned to him privately so that he could personally mete out punishment befitting the outrages committed against master and plantation by the slave.

Hunnicutt regretted fiercely that the bodies of five white men had been found. If only he could have caught Royal before those bodies had been discovered!

The slave had, of course, been blamed for the killings, and that was why the militia had been called in, and that was why Hunnicutt's right to punish the runaway was now jeopardized. If the militia took Royal, he would be hauled away to New Orleans, held for trial for murder and given the death penalty. And Lee Hunnicutt, owner and master, would be unable to get his hands on the black renegade. He would be cheated out of his rightful revenge.

Now he brooded as he rode. With him rode Arthur Stone of Axmore Plantation, Harold Vannice of Rivercane, and Lester and Luther Larkin, twin owners of Black Thorn. Hunnicutt reminded himself how young

Billy Owens of Owens Acres had been killed a month ago when Royal escaped and who, because of Royal, was not tonight a member of this posse.

"That damned nigra bastid," he muttered to Vannice. "I aim to kill him once foah causin' Billy Owens' death . . . wastin' Billy's life an' throwin' it away, an' the lad not but twenty-one!"

"Be faiah, Lee," returned Vannice, who was sixty and senior member of the posse. "The nigra didn' have no paht of killin' Billy. It was youah cousin Lida kilt him, an' he kilt huh at the same time."

"If he hadn' run, none of it would of happened," persisted Hunnicutt, his ever-seething rage growing fiercer. "You know that, suh . . . you all know it . . . don' you?"

He had to wait, and during the wait his anger quickened, but finally the others agreed because it was true and they couldn't deny it. He'd beaten down all their arguments. They couldn't get around the fact that if the brute-nigra had stayed at Hunnicutt Hill where he belonged because he was chattel—a well-fed, wench-pampered stud—none of these things would have happened.

"Weah headin' back foah the plantation house," he told his companions suddenly. "Weah goin' to take a look an' see if he has come back."

"He ain' likely a second time to kidnap that Princess-wench," said Stone. "Look at the trouble he got into the fust time. He's a smaht nigra . . . he ain' goin' to repeat none of his formah actions, Lee."

"He ain't that smaht," retorted Hunnicutt. Then, thoughtfully, "On the othah han', mebbe he's even smahtah than you think. Mebbe he figuahs we'll not expect him to repeat his formah actions, so he *will* repeat 'em, an' mebbe git away with 'em! C'mon, gent'men . . . it's been a good three houahs since we checked the house an' quahtahs . . . le's ridel!"

"You suah you thinkin' cleah, Lee?" asked Vannice as they wheeled their horses. "What you said is kin' of involved."

"Suah it is," retorted Hunnicutt, "but I got a feelin' . . . I got a strong conviction that Royal'll try ag'in to git that wench. An' when he does, I wan' to ketch him at it!" He dug his heels into his horse's flanks, setting him into a gallop. Behind and around him the others galloped. The posse rode like the wind for Hunnicutt Hill.

At the plantation the trusties, Bone and Cat, reported all to be quiet. Nothing had been seen of Royal.

Despite this, Hunnicutt ordered them to fetch lanterns and, with the help of his friends, searched stable and quarters and all the grounds. He ordered the stud pens unlocked and looked over the bucks to make sure Royal was not being hidden by his fellow slaves. He repeated the process with the wench pens, the sucker pens, even the jail.

He then led his friends into the plantation house where they apologetically helped him search from first floor to attic and back again. While the others returned to the first floor, Lee looked in on Frances, his bride.

He grasped the silver knob and pushed open the heavy, polished mahogany door. Frances was propped up in her wide bed, her blonde hair smooth and parted, with a long knot at the back and a few curls at the side of her face. He stared angrily at the milky skin, the lovely, patrician features, especially the pink and shapely lips and the stubborn tilt to the chin.

Her blue eyes, wide and half-alarmed, stared back. "Leel!" she cried in the silvery voice he admired. "Did you . . . catch him? Did you capture Royal?" And then she awaited his reply and he saw the fear for the Negro in her eyes.

And his other rage took him. That his Yankee bride, still abed from the wound she'd suffered six nights ago because of Royal, should care what had happened to the killer-buck. His rage grew. She had at first denied him her virgin body in an effort to hold him to a drunken courtship promise to free all his slaves.

"No, I ain' caught him!" he bellowed. "He's still at lahge . . . still killin' white people! We came back to

make suah he ain' tryin' to git that Princess wench ag'in! You quit thinkin' 'bout him, heah me? You spen' youah time an' strength makin' me a son an' heir! I don' wan' you wastin' youahse'f worryin' whethah a runnah is to be kilt or ain' he . . . I wan' youah min' on my fam'ly affaihs! Wheah's Gingah?"

"Heah I am, Mastah Lee," said the tall, yellow cook. She came from a corner of the room where she had been sitting, walking with assurance, for she had nursed Hunnicutt from infancy. "I bin watchin' ovah the mistress like you tol' me. She doin' good, Mastah Lee . . . huh shouldah healin' fine."

"Keep that Princess-wench locked in the attic so's Royal can't git huh," Hunnicutt ordered.

"She lock in good, Mastah Lee," the thin old wench assured him. "Gingah look aftah Miss Frances, an' she look aftah the wench."

"Go down to the kitchen," Hunnicutt said, "an' fix coffee an' grub . . . biscuits an' ham an' eggs'll do. The gent'men an' me is goin' to ride down to my Cousin Lida's ol' house an' see if that runnah hidin' theah, an' then weah comin' back to eat afoah we staht out ag'in. Have that grub ready when we get back, heah me?"

"You kin count on it, Mastah Lee," the wench said and hurried from the room.

"You'll be ready foah me f'um this moment on," Hunnicutt told his bride. "Tonight, if the othah men gits tiahed an' wan's to rest, I'll be back to youah room. With my angah up like it is, it won' take but once to git my son stahted in you."

Without giving her time to respond, he left the room and went swiftly down the stairway.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

As he reached the bottom step, he heard horses pounding up to the back. He went on a run for the back gallery to see who had arrived.

The first thing he noticed was six horsemen surrounded by the members of his personal posse. The second thing he noticed, by the light of lanterns, was the hot glint of red hair on one of the horsemen.

This was Wood, one of his private searchers. Wood had been at the Sproul shanty three days ago when Hunnicutt had bought the wenches. Which was another thing angering him. Sproul, who had promised to deliver the wenches two days ago, had been one of the men found in the burial pit. Which meant Hunnicutt had paid one thousand dollars in account on the wenches and now he had no notion where they were.

Maybe Royal had them. Maybe that was why he hadn't come sneaking back for Princess. Angrily Hunnicutt bore down on Wood, who dismounted and stood bowing and scraping.

"What you doin' heah?" Hunnicutt demanded.

"Know whut we foun'?" Wood countered. "In two separate grave-holes?"

"What'd you fin'?" Hunnicutt asked impatiently.

"We foun' Hosea Derrick an' a fella named Whisson fresh-berried . . . an' thet Sproul woman. At another place we foun' them wenches you bought an' a lil' white boy berried."

Hunnicutt began to swear, steadily and softly.

"All three the dead females," Wood continued, into the swearing, "was tortured to death."

"It's that nigra . . . it's Royall!" shouted Hunnicutt.

"He's on a killin' rampage! I tell you, gent'men," he went on, "we got to ketch him befoah the law does! It's now not jus' ouah right as mastahs to punish this pahticulah black—it's ouah duty as Southan gent'men to make an example of him! To demonstrate to ev'ry nigra that no slave kin rape an' tortuah an' murdah white women an' white men . . . an' live to be dealt with by the law of the lan'. They got to leahn 'bout an eye foah an eye, a tooth foah a tooth! They got to leahn that the nigra is dealt with by the law of the mastah . . . an' in this case I am the mastah!"

There was instant agreement. Even Vannice was nodding.

"I aim," Hunnicutt told the men, "to git my full rewahd's worth through torturin' that black to death with my own han's."

They accepted what he said in silence. If they did not concur, at least they did not protest. He stood for a moment brooding, thinking of the things he would do to Royal, who had now cost him an additional thousand dollars. The list of sins committed by the big black was never-ending and ever-growing.

Because of Royal, Hunnicutt had been forced to execute one of his prime bucks.

Because of Royal, Princess had lost her sucker.

Because of Royal, Lida had been killed.

Because of Royal, Hunnicutt had lost a fortune in gold.

Because of Royal, Frances had been wounded.

Because of Royal, Billy Owens had been killed.

All of Hunnicutt's troubles had begun after Royal came onto the plantation, him with king-blood.

Revenge was Hunnicutt's objective now, not punishment but pure revenge. He recognized this and gloried in it. The lust for revenge had a heady taste—through his body, even on his tongue. It was like wine.

He had to keep the militia from capturing his prey. He had to retain for himself the luxury—now, the necessity—of revenge.

It was an obsession. This too he recognized and rejoiced in. He was suddenly fiercely glad that bounty hunters were coming in from all over the South. They were money-hungry. They would drag Royal, bound and alive, not to the law for punishment but to him, Lee Hunnicutt, who would pay handsomely.

He swung onto Fury, his stallion. "Weah goin' to Lida's ol' house to see if he's hidin' theah," he shouted. "Then we comin' back heah to eat, an' aftah that, we ridin' out ag'in!"

They were only half-way to Lida's lane when a rider came pounding up. "Mister Hunnicutt?" asked the rider and, when Lee had identified himself, continued. "They is a white woman sez she seen a big nigger an' two white boys—t'other side of the river!"

A moment's question of the rider and the hunt was on. Only Royal fitted the description of the giant Negro the woman had reported seeing. And two of the Sproul boys, the rider said, were thought to be missing.

"You know what this means, gent'men!" Hunnicutt cried. "It means them boys are Royal's hostages . . . his nex' victims . . . unless we stop him!"

By the time they had reached the river road and were streaking along it, this theory was spreading like wildfire.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

It was pitch-black in the shanty when Royal woke, sensing trouble. He lay motionless, the wool on his neck acrawl, and listened.

He heard Merle come creeping across the floor on hands and knees. "They mus' be lots more men at the tavern," the boy whispered, his lips against Royal's ear. "Somebody snuk over here, an' now he's sneakin' back t'other way like he must of seen us an' is goin' to tell others waitin' fer him a piece off. Ye reckon we orta light out?"

Royal sat up. Carefully, making not the least sound, he settled the saddlebags of gold and oilcloth-wrapped shot around his neck. They had to go now, regardless of the danger, or they would be trapped. He whispered directions to Merle, and together they strapped the sleeping Billy to Royal's back. The child stirred, slept on.

Rising to a crouch, Royal slung the strap of his rifle over one shoulder, thrust the pistol into his shirt and the knife into his belt, passing the second knife to Merle.

"Do what I do," he whispered.

Still in the crouch, he moved to the window hole on the side of the shack opposite to where Merle had seen the retreating spy. Through the hole he went, and at once to hands and knees in the tall grass, the lad doing the same.

Behind them, beyond the shack, men were gathered, ready to move in on the crumbling structure. Creeping on hands and knees, the sleeping child on his back, the lad following, Royal went through tall grass and weeds silently.

On through dark, dry, dusty growth. On and on, cut-

ting at a slant toward the river. It was further going at a slant but more protection from suspicious hunters who might be even now watching the direct space between shack and river.

Once, a tough stand of cutting-sharp grass whipped the child's face and he cried out softly in his sleep, once only. Merle whispered, "Billy . . . it's all right . . . Merle's here . . . sleep . . . even when we swim . . . even in the water . . . sleep."

Toward the dark river of gently rocking water they crept through night grass, ever toward the river. To the lapping black water and into the water, deep here at the shore, Royal went, the small sleeping Billy on his back.

Again the child cried out but in a whisper. And in a whisper, himself in the water now, Merle soothed and comforted. "It a swim we goin' fer . . . sleep on, Billy-boy . . . sleep an' swim . . . Merle's here . . . don' make noise . . . not now . . . not never."

Royal held to the growth at the bank and beside him Merle held. Royal listened, peered into the blackness of the shore, around and across the star and moon sparkled stretches, sought out the patches of blackness where a stealthy swimmer could move without splash, without starshine to reveal him to eyes of patroller, bounty hunter militia man, ne'er-do-well.

He considered the width of the river at this point. It was narrower, perhaps, than elsewhere, but still it was wide, vast for the lad to swim at night, with danger lining his bones. Under existing conditions, dared they swim the river? Could Merle swim that far? But there was nothing else left to do; the trackers back yonder could soon be in hot pursuit. The only thing for it was to leave, to deprive them of any quarry. Finding no one, they might go back and search elsewhere.

"Can you swim the rivah?" Royal asked Merle.

"I tol' ye afore," the boy whispered back, "I'm a good swimmer. I kin make it."

Royal considered whether searchers he'd seen in small boats along both shores of the stream during daylight

hours would be patrolling at night. Of course they would, he decided, for they knew well that a runner hides by day, flees by night. However, if Royal and Merle could evade boatmen plying the shorelines and if they kept to the blackest part of the river, bodies low in the water, they did have a chance.

Still in the black, wet shadow of shore, Royal heard voices now at the shanty. Out in midstream, a sidewheeler ploughed along and when it had passed, Royal whispered, "Now!" to the lad, "Quiet, little man," to Billy and struck out, pulling through the water with long, slow, stealthy, powerful strokes, Merle following with only the softest sound as he stroked and stroked.

The river seemed suddenly to be alive with craft, most of it bound downstream. Another sidewheeler churned past, bound for the Passess at the end of the river. Its wake rocked the water and Royal swam a shade faster to take advantage of the diversion this was bound to create for any boat-borne trackers, the momentary drawing of the searching gaze from the barren water to the roiling wake of the sidewheeler. Behind him, Merle swam faster too, but Royal sensed this was all the speed the lad had in his wiry arms. Consequently he held his own progress steady, the child sleeping uneasily on his back.

Ahead, to the left, a rowboat was toiling upstream. To the right, a flatboat was bearing downriver. Behind, on the far side, was a fishing boat, the voices of the men floating across the water. And beneath water—black water. Royal ceased swimming, remained in one spot, arms out on the water and moving gently, feet moving to keep himself and the child afloat. Beside him Merle . . . wordless, near-breathless, doing the same.

The various craft passed, each making its sound—the rowboat silent, the dip of its oars hidden by the sidewheeler noise. If those in the rowboat were trackers, they did not see the big black stud and the white strippling treading water, waiting for the moment when they could resume their stroking, endless stroking.

They swam. Other craft passed and they trod water

again, swam, trod water. As they neared the far shore, Royal slowed, listening and looking as he swam. Their big danger now was that patrollers might be watching the entire Hunnicutt Hill shore and the river road which ran past it.

They continued to swim—slow, feeling strokes through black water. Merle never faltering or complaining. The sleeping child rousing and becoming quiet, sleeping again. Touching shore at last, Royal remained in the river to reconnoiter by ear, eye and nose. Yonder, almost in a beeline, stood the plantation house, though he could not see it from his position in the water.

Gradually, keeping to the river, he moved downstream, working steadily further from the plantation. It was impossible to make for the house at this moment; they must go into the swamp.

On his back, Billy began crying silently, scared and bewildered and whispering that he was hungry, and above all wanting his Ma. "S'h'h," Merle whispered, "s'h'h . . . Merle's here . . . Merle ain' goin' ter leave ye . . . s'h'h!" And the child, hearing a familiar, trusted voice, subsided, sighed, slept.

When they were well below the plantation house, Royal stood in the river, looking, listening, sniffing the air. A horseman galloped by on the road, the horse's hooves loud at first, dying away, gone.

"Now!" Royal whispered, and on hands and knees crawled out of the water, up the bank and to the edge of the road. Into a small, dark stand of trees he crept, the boy making only the smallest of sounds as he followed.

In the trees Royal waited, peering up and down the road which lay empty and lit by moon and stars, yet with great pools of darkness cast by trees and other growth. It was through one such great pool that Royal crawled furtively across and into a pasture. Here cows rested beneath great trees which cast blackness upon them.

Far back from the road, they got a cow to her feet and drank their fill of milk, Royal and the lad expressing it

from her teats into their own mouths and into the open, yearning mouth of the child. Afterward, walking cautiously, they left the pasture, passed warily through a corn patch, where they broke off ears of tender corn, which they ate hidden in the patch. The kernels were tiny and soft, their milk tasting green and sweet. The chewed mouthfuls went down swiftly, easing Royal's hunger which remained despite the milk from the cow.

Back of the corn patch, they came upon a vegetable garden. In moonlight, because there was no nearby house or shanty, Royal dug up new potatoes, while Merle, at his direction, pulled new, tender carrots. These they bolted, even the small child eating the raw carrots and asking for more.

When they had eaten and after they had stuffed potatoes and carrots into their pockets, Royal led toward the trees. He was making for the swamp at the other side of which lay Lida's cottage and the cave-cellar in which had taken place the fight on the night of Royal's escape a month ago.

Once, from a small house some distance away, a dog began to bark, running toward them. Royal melted instantly into the edge of the swamp, Merle with him, stood for a long time. The dog stopped, whined, yapped once or twice, turned and went trotting back through the moonlight to his house.

Another time, coming out of the trees, Royal spied a cabin only when they were almost upon it. Quickly he led back into the trees but not before he had glimpsed candle flare and someone coming to the door.

Straight for Lida's cottage, Royal headed through the swamp. The swamp's black waters were thick with dissolving vegetation; bulrushes were higher than Royal's head and when he wasn't careful enough, sawgrass threatened his flesh like a razor.

He led through salt cane, alligator weeds and hundreds of other night-hidden plants. In this night swamp wilderness swarmed all manner of wild life—insects, lizards, birds, ducks, gulls, pouch-billed pelicans.

Now Royal was making his way through tall willows, soft cottonwoods and hackberries black in the night. Past twisted oaks, inlets and a bayou—and right there, a mile and a quarter back from the plantation house, sprawled the silver-weathered cottage for which he was bound. Except that now, even in moonlight, it too looked black, like the growth, like the water.

He stood at the swamp's edge and regarded the house. No light showed; no sound came from it. It wasn't a safe place for them. Even if it was deserted, as it looked to be, Hunnicutt was bound to search it periodically. But Royal had to risk it, at least for now. He didn't know how soon dawn would come, and he had to hide the boys.

He moved to the house and listened, moved all the way around it, listening. Nothing. He tried the kitchen door, the one Lida had used, and it was unlocked. Making no sound, leaving the boys in the kitchen, he searched the house. It was empty. For the moment it offered refuge.

He bedded the boys in Lida's bed. Suddenly he was aware of the fatigue in his own great body, of the hunger for sleep but he denied it and returned to the kitchen. He laid the saddlebags on the table, put his rifle and pistol beside them, emptied the vegetables from his pockets. Then he sat in a chair at the table to ponder in night and quiet.

He could think of no other way to get Princess than as he had done before—to steal into the mistress' room at night and waken her. He sensed that Hunnicutt might be on the watch for this very move. Thus he knew that he must find another way.

At least he had Merle and Billy situated so they could get to the mistress. And none too soon, for now word would go out, if it had not already done so, that the runaway slave was traveling with two white boys. From this point on, the Sproul boys would mark Royal and beyond that would themselves be in danger because they were in his company.

He dropped his head onto his arms. He slept.

He woke. Sun was shining in his face, streaming through the door, which he had not closed, choosing to watch the darkness beyond.

Relief swept him that he was still free. He leapt up and closed the door, rendering the house, to the casual eye, as it had been. Walking noiselessly he looked into Lida's room; the boys were sleeping, their mouths open.

Established in the kitchen, back from the window, yet able to see out, he cleaned rifle and pistol, using rags he found on a shelf. His shot, though it had been wrapped in oilcloth, was damp. He rummaged through Lida's kitchen, finding ammunition in a cupboard.

A sound at the door whirled him, knife in hand.

It was Pansy, the quadroon wench who had been the most desired by all the bucks before Princess had arrived. She was staring at him, open-mouthed.

"You hidin' heah?" she gasped. "You crazy, Royall"

"It's the only place I could find," he told her. "Why did you come heah, Pansy?"

"I got ohdahs to clean the place up," she replied. "Mastah got two new wenches . . . octeroon sistahs . . . they was goin' to live heah. They bin kilt but I ain' got no ohdahs *not* to clean up, so I de-cided I bettah do it anyhow. The mastah, he so shoht-tempahed these days . . . I don' wan' to git no whippin' 'cause I didn' do what I'se ohdahed to do, whethah they no need foah it or not."

Royal thought of the tortured Suzan and Noele, whom he had buried. Sadness knifed through him, not only for them but for Lida. He wondered what Hunnicutt's reaction had been when he learned that his new-bought octeroon wenches were dead. He wondered if Hunnicutt believed that he, Royal, had killed them.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"All kin's of white men is huntin' foah you, Royal," Pansy told him. "The mastah an' his frien's an' strangahs, too. The mastah rides back to see if you sneaked onto the plantation. The slaves say he thinks you goin' to kidnap that Princess wench ag'in, an' the mastah got huh locked in the attic. That what youah up to, Royal—gittin' that wench ag'in?"

Royal gazed at her, not answering.

"All us wan's you to escape, Royal," Pansy continued. "We wan's to escape ouahselves, 'specially now that youah loose. All us feels that Mastah Lee has always bin a hahd mastah, an' that he'll be real mean now, aftah all that's happened, an' that he'll kill some of us in his meanness."

Royal continued to gaze at her. There was nothing to say, except that he agreed with the slaves. It would accomplish nothing if he told Pansy that; it certainly wouldn't change their situation.

"We wan' you to escape even if you has to kill a whole passel of white men," Pansy went on. "We plannin' ouah uprisin' . . . tryin' to git it wheah we kin all escape while things is in this tuhmoil ovah you. If the slaves fin' out youah heah, if I carry wohd to 'em, ev'ry slave on the plantation, almost, will stan' ready to he'p you."

"And will you carry the word?"

"I will—if you do what I wan', what I bin wantin' since the day the mastah brought you heah."

He waited, instinct telling him what it was she wanted—the same thing every female, Negro or white—wanted from him.

"You pleasuahed ev'ry young wench on the plantation

but me," Pansy said. "I'll cahhy wohd foah you, if you pleasuah me, heah an' now."

He shook his head in wonder. "You had all the othah bucks on the plantation," he reminded her.

"They ain' you . . . they ain' as tall as you . . . or as big . . . or strong," she declared. "I know some of the wenches you covahed wasn' as puhty as I am . . . look at me . . . see foah youahse'f how puhty I am!"

Royal obligingly looked her over, aware that he'd never before taken note of her charms. She was of medium height and shapely, her skin the soft color of well-creamed coffee. She was wearing a scarlet tignon on her head; her features were slightly thick but attractively formed, the lips well-shaped, the eyes black and shining. She was wearing a scarlet calico dress which fitted closely and revealed her full, pointed breasts. The nipples puckered the fabric and her mound lifted it in a soft arc beneath her flat belly.

"Am I puhty?" she asked softly.

He nodded.

"Wheah we goin' to pestah . . . in heah or on a baid?"

There was nothing else to do. If he refused, she might even report his presence to the master. Besides, his need for woman had always been strong and it was strong now. So he gestured toward the second bedroom and she skipped lightly in, stripped her dress over her head and threw herself upon the counterpane, wearing only the tignon.

When he would have fallen upon her, she held him off. "I want you bare like me," she whispered. "Like you pleasuahed them othah wenches . . . my skin an' youah skin a-rubbin' . . . my hair an' youah hair joinin' us wheah you got into me!"

Eyes on the full flow of breast, waist, hips, thighs, he peeled off his garments. His organ sprang free and fierce; suddenly he was as anxious as she was. With one motion he came onto the bed and plunged into her. She gurgled with joy and suddenly this evoked joy in Royal as well. He began to move in the tight grasp of her vagina, move

with joy and verve and she matched him as if they were doing a tribal dance. He felt the bed move and sway with their dance. He felt the grasp and release, the grasp and release of her tight, wonderful walls. He felt his organ grow and swell until it burst, and then he felt the hot outpouring of his own joyous juices into her joyous, receptive depths. And he listened to the gurgling in her throat, the joyous, triumphant gurgle of a woman delighted and satisfied and joyfully grateful.

Without withdrawing, he repeated the joy. This time he, too, was grateful. And a third time they found joy. The thought went through him that the pressure of flight and hunger, coupled now with a renewed hunger for food, seemed to have increased both his desire for women and his prowess with them.

When they had dressed, Pansy spoke further about the slaves at Hunnicutt Hill. "They all bin hopin' you'd come back," she said. "They say do you come, mebbe-so you he'p us in the uprisin' an' we he'p you."

Royal considered. He concluded, reluctantly, that he almost had to join the uprising. If his fellow slaves were to help him, he could not refuse to help them and be the only one to escape.

"How can I be part of the uprising?" he asked. "How can I get to the othahs, them locked in the pens at night?"

"They don' talk in the pens . . . they don' make plans theah," Pansy reminded him. "They talk in the fiel's . . . secret."

Of course, he thought. Instantly his heart was a monstrous thing in him. He would go into the fields, too! Today. He would work at the edge of a field, plan with the others—if Hunnicutt had not yet got an overseer to replace the slain Slocum.

He told Pansy his plan. "They ain' no new ovahseeah," she assured him. "On'y the trustees . . . Cat an' Bone . . . are actin' as ovahseeahs. An' they foolin' the mastah, 'cause they in the uprisin'."

"Theah were some slaves that didn't want to be part of the uprising," Royal said. "How do they feel now?"

"'Bout the same but they won' tell on the res' of us. They promise not to betray theah black blood."

Royal knew her statement to be true, knew further that he was safe from betrayal from all but Guy, the big, mean Negro fighter whom Hunnicutt pitted against fighters owned by his friends. Guy hated Royal and would do anything in his power to hurt him.

He mentioned Guy to Pansy.

"I won' tell Guy," she promised. "The one I'll talk to is Ebon, the leadah of the uprisin'. Don' worry . . . you trus' me . . . I wan' to run with you if you'll let me . . . I'll even not fuss 'bout Princess."

After she had gone, Royal waited. The unearthly silence of the swamp seemed to bear down on the cottage, deepening and deadening it until it must be as quiet as the grave itself to the unhearing corpse. The dead overhang of branches and Spanish moss, of gray-green foliage, the secret life he knew to be in the swamp—snakes and birds and insects—all lived and slithered silently in the brooding silence. The loneliness of the swamp, which might hold safety or might hold danger and death, covered the silence and made it a deadly thing. And upon the loneliness which covered the silence, the morning sun shone hot and melting but it melted none of the loneliness, none of the silence.

It could have been an hour, a day, an eternity. But at last Pansy returned with Ebon. The thirty-year-old stud looked blacker and stronger than ever, his face wider, the features bigger, the scowl more deeply serious.

"You all right, boy?" Ebon queried.

Pansy put a packet of food on the table.

"I ate raw vegetables," Royal said. "I'll save this foah the two white boys sleeping in one of the rooms." He gestured to the saddlebags, looked at Ebon. "That's gold," he said, "given to me by the mistress. You can use it to buy rifles for the uprising . . . can you get rifles and shot?"

"Suah," Ebon said. "We got a source but until now we ain' had the money."

"How long will it take?"

"One or two days."

"While we wait," Royal said, "we'll show the slaves, in the fields, how to load and aim and pull triggah."

"I don' know if they kin hit a tahgit," Ebon said.

"That doesn't mattah," Royal replied. "The uprising must go through as soon as possible and no white must be killed."

"An' uprisin' without no killin'?" cried Ebon. "How we 'compish that?"

"First, we don't want rifle fire heard on the rivah road or on the rivah itself," Royal explained. "It would draw attention to Hunnicutt Hill. Ouah entire success rests on locking up the whites, as well as the slaves who don't want to run, and leaving quietly, in a body."

"Won' that draw 'tention," asked Ebon, "ovah two hundred slaves walkin' in a body?"

"We'll break up in twos and threes or into family groups," Royal planned. "That way, we'll all get a good start foah the North befoah anybody knows there has been an uprising."

Ebon stood nodding as he considered. Then a thought struck him. "If theah's gold lef' ovah f'um buyin' rifles an' shot," he asked, "who gits it?"

"It will be divided among the slaves so they'll have something to use until they can become established in the North," Royal replied. "Theah will be enough gold foah all, even aftah the rifles and shot are paid foah. I've got twenty-five thousan' dollahs."

"You figgah," Ebon speculated, "that the slaves, havin' rifles an' not shootin' 'em, will impress the mastah an' his frien's . . . 'cause they don' know the slaves'll have ohdahs not to shoot."

"Aftah we surprise them," Royal said, "and we will surprise them. We'll have ouah guns pointed at them befoah they realize we have guns and befoah they have time to lift theah weapons."

"They'll know theah facin' death," Ebon said with satisfaction.

"Only nobody's to shoot," Royal insisted, "except out of real need. The mastah ain't to be killed," he continued, "in any event, nor the mistress. Nor the two little white boys in this house. Weah having an uprising—not an insurrection."

"They'll call it an insurrection," Ebon said.

"Theah is a difference," Royal told him, fiercely calm. "Theah is a difference, no matter what the white people call it latah."

This time Ebon did not respond, nor did Pansy, who had said nothing for moments. They both looked worried, almost frightened. Royal felt the wool on his neck stir. At the crucial moment, could he control the fear which would take the new-armed slaves? Could he hold them back from killing, from carnage, from revenge? Could he really pull off an uprising, bloodless and merciful?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Before Ebon left to return to his work in the fields, his absence hopefully unnoted by the trusties and, if noted, overlooked, Royal took the saddlebags into the bedroom where he had pleased Pansy. He pushed the bed aside, loosened floorboards, stuffed the bags inside, replaced the boards and pulled the bed back into place.

Pansy had watched the procedure in silence.

"Now," Royal said, "you both know wheah the gold is hidden. If anythin' happens to me, you can get it out and carry on the uprising."

He repeated that the mistress had given him leave to use it as he must. "She won't mind if it's used to set the slaves on this plantation free," he told them.

Rapidly he related what Princess had told him. How the mistress had wanted her bridegroom to free all his slaves as he had promised. How Hunnicutt, after marriage, had refused to make good his promise. How the mistress could not tolerate the system of slavery and had herself become a slave in marriage, and how she, too, wanted to escape North.

He had just finished, when Merle came into the room, flushed from sleep. "This is Pansy and Ebon," he told the boy. "They are ouah friends. Pansy is going to be heah with you. Theah is food in the kitchen; you and Billy eat. Keep him inside and if any white person comes, and youah forced to explain why youah heah, say you and Billy escaped from a big Negro across the rivah and that the Negro was on his way to New Orleans. You undahstand just how to say it, don't you, Merle?"

The boy nodded. "Where ye goin'?"

"I'm going with Ebon and I'll be back come dark,"

Royal said, hoping he could keep the promise. "What-evah happens, aftah Pansy leaves, you and Billy stay in this house. Don't try to run . . . just tell the story I gave you."

"We bettah go fas', you goin' with me," Ebon urged. "I bin away fum the fiel' too long. Why you goin' with me, 'zactly?"

Royal led to the kitchen, took up his rifle, tossed it to Ebon. "Hide that undah youah clothes," he said. "They fit loosah than mine." Still talking, he shoved the pistol inside his shirt and put some shot into his pockets. "I'm going into the edge of the fields and begin teaching the men . . . and the women . . . how to load and aim and pull triggah."

"You suah don' aim to lose no time," Ebon said happily, working the rifle into his loose-fitting trouser leg. "I'll go ahead, an' you kin folla me. Bettah go into that south fiel' of cohn fu'st."

With Ebon some distance ahead, Royal followed through morning swamp, eyes alert, ears ready for the first sign of enemy. Past still-dewy morning green he padded toward the fields, toward the river, noting the ever-present verdance of grass, tree and bush edging bayou banks. High amid willow branches clustered masses of plants, and in the bayou itself were matted water hyacinths, their swollen, waxy leaves holding lavender flowers over the water.

He moved cautiously through this wild growth, which reminded him of the jungle, back in Africa. Ever watchful for some skulking white man, he trod, ever watchful for snakes. The great swamp trees stood silent and heavy with foilage; birds flapped their wings, crying harshly in the oppressive damp heat, and beyond and around, frogs croaked endlessly.

Just beyond the swamp lay the cornfield. Here, among the waving green rows, stooped-back slaves wielded hoes against weeds which daily threatened the late corn.

Royal slipped into the rows and crouched, hidden even from the blacks working the field. There was a

whisper of corn stalks and Ebon was handing him the rifle and a hoe.

"Ain' nobody in this fiel' that'll repoht you," he whispered. "Guy's at the othah end of the plantation, pickin' cotton. We'll git him settled, keep him f'um ruinin' the insurrection jus' 'cause he hates you. Evahbody in this fiel' wan's to escape . . . Now I'll tell each one to watch foah you an' be ready to hide in the rows an' leahn the rifle an' pistol. Aftah that, while I wohk, I'll fin' some 'scuse to git to the shoeshop an' tell Silas to git the guns . . . he makin' the deal 'cause he the one kin git away f'um the plantation to buy leathah an' 'rouse no suspicion. An' I'll wahn the trusties to keep wheah they don' see you an' can' be blamed foah not repoahatin' you to the mastah."

"Silas made up his mind to be in the uprising?" asked Royal.

"Him an' othahs," Ebon replied. "Sence you escaped . . . way the mastah actin', lots of 'em figgah they liable to be kilt if they stay, so they might's well risk bein' kilt runnin' foah freedom. Silas even said that to me with his own mouf. Latah on I'll take you back through the swamp, walkin' guahd, like I brought you."

Without another word he melted away through the rows and Royal was alone.

He placed his rifle a little distance ahead and began to chop weeds, gradually working toward the sound of another chopper. Every few feet he moved the rifle ahead, chopped to it, moved again.

The first chopper proved to be one of the younger bucks. When he spied Royal, he dropped his hoe and waited. His eyes were on the rifle, bright and eager, as he watched Royal break it open, load, aim, stroke finger along the trigger. Then, still in silence, the young buck took the rifle into his own hands, broke it open, unloaded, reloaded, brought it up along his cheek and sighed. He stroked his finger just above the trigger. Then they repeated the process with the pistol.

Only once did Royal speak. "Theah is to be no

shooting unless ouah lives depend on it," he whispered. "If theah is shooting, it will be heard on the rivah road and white men will come and ouah uprising may fail. The rifles are only to help us ovahcome the white men and lock them up."

Disappointment heavy on his face, the buck nodded. He turned away, picked up his hoe, resumed chopping. Royal, carrying arms and hoe, moved to another spot, began his chop, move, chop, working toward his next willing and eager pupil. Thus he showed one slave after another how to load the weapons, explained how to aim and pull trigger. And he instructed them, every one, that they were not to shoot unless their lives depended on it.

Two days passed in this manner. Royal made progress not only in teaching the use of firearms but in organizing the actual mechanics of the uprising itself.

Despite all efforts, there was one area in which he consistently failed. He could find no way to get word to Princess, locked in the plantation house attic, that he was at Hunnicutt Hill. Not one slave he spoke to about approaching Ginger, the only one who had access to either the white mistress or the incarcerated Princess, would agree.

"Gingah ain' to be trusted," one slave woman told Royal as they bent in adjoining rows, picking cotton. "Gingah ain' bin tol' nothin' 'bout the uprisin'. She'd tell the mastah . . . she on his side, no mattah what. She wetnuhsed the mastah, an' no mattah how mean he git, she take his paht."

Late the second afternoon Ebon brought word that Silas had managed a rendezvous with the smuggler whom he had earlier contacted. He had bought arms for twenty gold dollars per rifle and one hundred pounds of shot.

"How soon can we got to the cottage and talk?" Royal asked, never missing a motion in his cotton picking.

Ebon, also picking, dragged his sack along, speaking as he moved. "Wuk to the end of the row . . . we kin make foah the swamp soon's Cat gits to the othah end of

the fiel'. He ain' goin' show he misses me but if we do it this way, it make it appeah I'm slippin' off an' if any whites show up, it wouldn' be so hahd on Cat."

Royal worked to the end of the row, rolled up his cotton-bag and went toward the swamp, where he left the bag under some bushes. He melted through the trees, then waited for Ebon, who appeared silently to lead the way as usual, the theory being that if any white man loomed in the path he would think little of meeting Ebon. Ebon, then, would greet the white man loudly and Royal could hide.

Following Ebon, Royal considered how Hunnicutt had been back and forth to the plantation these two days. Each time Royal had been warned and had taken to the swamp, the boys with him, until the master had again departed.

"Youah path's cleah the res' of the way," Ebon whispered when the cottage was in sight. "The rifles an' shot will be delivahed tonight. By boat. You wait on the bayou undah the biggest oak. You kin count out the gold to the smugglah then."

Thus, in dead of night, appeared the boat upon the bayou. In the boat were two men, the rifles, the shot. With Royal helping, they carried the arms and ammunition into the second bedroom. Then, after the second man had returned to the boat. Royal led the smuggler into the kitchen and counted out the gold he had ready and waiting.

The smuggler, beetle-browed and white and nameless, counted too, his thin lips moving. "Two thousan', two-hundred forty," he said. "To the dollar. Ye goin' to want more rifles?"

"I reckon not, suh," Royal said. "Thank you kindly."

After the fellow had left, Royal hid all the rifles under floor boards which he loosened, then laid back in place.

At dawn he was prowling the swamp, searching out alternate hiding places for the firearms, the shot, the gold. There was a dry, hidden cave; there were hollow trunks

of trees which would serve in an emergency. He located each possible hiding place and memorized its location.

When it was time for Ebon to appear with food and to lead him deviously to the fields that third day, Royal waited near the accustomed path. Instead of Ebon appearing, it was Pansy who came running lightly, lips parted, face frightened.

Royal moved into the path, trying not to startle her. Even so, she gasped. Then she ran to him.

"Ebon sent mel" she panted. "The mastah an' his frien's jus' rode in to eat breakfus! Ebon's comin' soon's he kin . . . he say foah you to hide fas'!"

Royal raced to the cottage, dragged out the saddlebags, replaced the floor boards. Making sure there was no sign of himself or the boys having been there, he instructed Merle, "Bring Billy and come . . . make no noisel"

With the saddlebags slung around his neck, rifle in one hand, carrying Billy on the other arm, Royal led rapidly into the swamp. Straight for the small, dry cave he made and when they reached it, he deposited the saddlebags at the back and told the boys to sit on the cave floor in front of the bags. He himself crouched at the opening, peering out through the growth of bramble bushes which concealed it and waited.

Moments crept past, an hour, more. There came the sound of horses' hooves, of men's voices. Royal's body went tense as he felt with all his senses toward those riding, searching, relentless white masters.

They were pounding up to the cottage. Now the sound of hooves ceased and the sound of voices increased. Royal felt sweat surge out of his pores and run down his face, his neck, his body. He felt it dampen the wool in which was rooted his mighty penis, which now was half-tumescent from excitement. Were the white men in the cottage, tramping through it? Was Hunnicutt even this instant noticing that the floor boards in that second bedroom had been loosened? Was he lifting a floor board

. . . finding a rifle . . . one hundred twelve rifles . . . shot? Was the uprising going to be defeated before it had truly begun?

There was the sound of hooves again and Royal felt his breath expel in a shuddering sigh. He was sheathed by perspiration but it was the streaming perspiration of relief.

They hadn't found the rifles. Not this trip. They were riding back to the house. The master must have taken a cursory look in the cottage, found it seemingly deserted, and had ridden on to track his runaway slave elsewhere.

"Kin we go back now?" Merle asked.

"I reckon," Royal replied. He began to scoop brush and debris over the saddlebags. Should Hunnicutt unexpectedly return and find the rifles before Royal could move them, at least there would remain the gold with which to purchase more.

He was leading the boys through swamp to the cottage, when Ebon appeared, bearing the day's rations. Behind him was Guy. Almost as big as Royal, the mammoth, unbelievably black fighter had not yet been beaten and twice had killed his opponent.

When Royal had fought Guy in the stud pen that night a month ago, they had been unable to finish. The overseer had heard the fracas and thrown open the door just as the other studs had parted the fighters. Hunnicutt, appearing on the scene, had been unable to find out who had been fighting and had consequently ordered every stud spanceled to his bunk in such manner he could not reach his penis. Then Hunnicutt and Slocum had raped Princess and Pansy, had traded wenches and raped again. When they were finished, they had turned the wenches over to the two trusties for further sport. As a result, Princess had lost her baby.

"If it ain' de king-buck!" drawled Guy now, in his heavy voice. "Think youah big stuff, don' you, niggah?"

"I don' know how he foun' out," Ebon declared.

"By bein' smaht . . . listening . . ." Guy snarled, his heavy features twisting. "Ah knowed you 'us behin' the

uprisin'," he told Royal, "all ah had to do was make suah. Now all I got to do is tell de mastah, an' he stop it an' kill hisse'f a passel of niggahs . . . you fust of all!"

"You ain' goin' to do no such thing!" Ebon growled.

"De mastah ain' in no foolin' notion," Guy continued as though he'd not been interrupted. "He suah Royal goin' to kidnap dat Princess wench ag'in. De bucks in de pen say de mastah ack like he gone crazy in his haid on dat one subjec'—that Royal comin' back to git dat wench. Look like de mastah ain' so crazy! Wait 'til ah tells him!"

"If you tell 'bout Royal," Ebon pointed out, "the uprisin'll fail, an' you'll lose youah chance at freedom, an' you may be killed by the mastah."

"Who say?" demanded Guy.

"The mastah ain' level-haided noah faiah-minded these days," Ebon said. "You bin paht of this uprisin' the whole time . . . you can' quit now!"

"Ah don' see nobody makin' me a leadah!" Guy snarled. "Ah de top fightah. Ah got a right to be a leadah in de uprisin'!"

"You kin be leadah in my place," offered Ebon, "if you keep youah mouf shet. I secon' on'y to Royal. He got to be fust, 'cause it's his money bought the guns."

Guy wavered and Royal quickly took advantage of his changing attitude. "We need anothah leader," he said. "You and Ebon can be co-lieutenants, of equal importance."

Guy pondered, his face heavy with indecision. Finally he nodded. "Dat's right wif me," he grumbled. "Le's go make plans while the mastah busy up at de house."

Accordingly the three Negro slaves and the two white boys made their way to the cottage. No sooner had they set Merle to be lookout and Billy to playing with some pebbles and sticks on the kitchen floor, than Pansy came dancing in.

"What you doin'?" she teased, slanting her eyes at Royal.

He caught Guy's instant glower and, in an effort to

keep the peace for the sake of the uprising, tried to fend her off. "We're making plans, Pansy," he said. "You want to sit down and listen?"

She ran to the back of his chair, put her arms around him and hugged. "No, I don't!" she giggled. "I wanna go in the bedroom! Let them two plan . . . they kin tell us what they planned when we git through!"

His face like thunder, Guy surged up from his chair. He yanked Pansy away from Royal.

"You go into any room wif any niggah, it goin' be me . . . not him!" he shouted.

Royal sprang to his feet. "Quiet!" he cautioned.

Guy squared away, fists ready, feet going into the fighter's dance. "You 'jeck to me tawkin'?" he snarled, but low, from deep in his throat. "You 'jeck to me pestahin' this wench? She ain' goin' in no room wif you!"

"Well, I suah ain' goin' in no room with you, Guy!" Pansy whispered loudly. "I'm goin' wif Royall I don' wan' you no moah . . . I wan's him!" She ran to Royal and linked both her hands around his arm.

"Let huh go!" threatened Guy. "Let huh go, or I'll kill yuh!"

With one wrench, Royal freed his arm. One leap and he was across the room, his fist slashing hard, slamming Guy's temple.

The mammoth fighter brought both fists down like boulders, hammering Royal full across the eyes, sending him staggering backward. Royal caught his balance and hurtled at the fighter, head down, aiming for the groin, slamming it full-tilt. Guy grunted deeply and gave way. Royal dodged him, slugging him in the face, the belly, the heart.

Guy stopped, stood as immovable as a mountain, taking Royal's furious, shaking blows. Suddenly he crashed one hard fist into Royal's heart, the other into his groin. Royal staggered sidewise to the floor, doubled with pain. He lunged up but even as Guy came at him, a battering ram of black power, Ebon brought his own big, hard

black body between them, absorbing both their blows, forcing them apart.

"Quit it . . . heah?" Ebon panted, struggling with them. "You wan' to be caught . . . you wan' to ruin the uprisin' because of a wench?"

Royal stood in a half-crouch; Guy crouched and circled. But Ebon kept between them, whispering on and on, and gradually they quieted, stood erect, loosened their fists. But they never ceased to look at each other meaningfully. Reading Guy's ugly glare, Royal knew the moment would come when he would have to kill the mammoth fighter—kill or be killed.

"What you come heah foah, Pansy?" Ebon demanded. "To stir up trouble?"

"N-no," quavered the wench. "I came back to make a repoht. The mistress is bettah. She kin even walk aroun' the house. Two of the house wenches has talked with huh."

Royal's blood leapt. If the mistress got a hint of what was afoot, she would tell Princess. Possibly the mistress would even try to escape along with the slaves.

"An' yestiday," Pansy continued, "I stole a stud pen key fum one of the trusties by lettin' him pestah me in the bushes. Then I give the key to Silas, an' he give it to the smithy, an' he made keys. Then I sneaked the key back onto the trusty in the bushes ag'in. An' heah's the keys that was made."

"What sense to keys?" demanded Guy. "Whut smaht 'bout dat? De trusties is in on de uprisin'. Or if dey wasn' in on it, we could jus' shoot de locks. All we need's de rifles . . . an' dem we got."

"With keys," Royal explained, "we don't shoot. It keeps our uprising secret so we get away secretly."

"Yeh," Ebon agreed, "dat de plan. You knows dat, Guy!"

"De mastah's here . . . tonight's de night," Guy pronounced.

"How many men are with him, Pansy?" Royal asked.

"Seven," she replied promptly. "They fixin' to leave soon's they eat."

"And meet that other posse with Wood," Royal conjectured. "We can't surprise them now, because the rifles haven't been given out. The first night the master is at Hunnicutt Hill, we'll be ready."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Lee Hunnicutt sat at the head of the table in his red-carpeted, rose-draped dining room. He glowered at the fine china, the crystal, the gleaming silver. He ate without tasting the fluffy biscuits, succulent ham and eggs and grits and red-eye gravy that Bax, the dignified Negro butler, was serving.

He even glowered moodily at the seven men of his personal posse, all of whom were eating with appetite. In addition to Arthur Stone, Harold Vannice and the Larkin twins, Lester and Luther, all of whom were older than Hunnicutt, three younger blades had joined up to run down the fleeing slave. These were Buford and Philip Estes and Wilbur Moorhead, all in their early twenties, all from further down-Delta.

His guests were talking among themselves, conjecturing as to where Royal might have got to by this time and how he had managed to remain at large so long.

"He ain' fah fum heah," Hunnicutt said. "I still got that feelin', got it strong."

"T'won't do any good to search close to the plantation house durin' daylight," offered young Moorhead, who was wiry and intense and always wanting to range miles afield. "We've looked evah place . . . I vote we covah some new territory!"

The Estes blades backed up their contemporary vigorously. Hunnicutt, glancing around the table, saw that even the older men agreed.

"All right," he conceded, because he must, because they were doing him a favor to leave their own plantations and ride the countryside. They were losing sleep and neglecting their own affairs. In fact, all the men had

merely napped when at Hunnicutt Hill and were getting tired. "We'll ride out durin' daylight houahs," he continued, "but if we don' run him down and if you gent'men is so disposed to he'p into the night a shoht time, I'd appreciate it if we could search close to the plantation."

"We agree, don' we, gent'men?" asked Vannice.

Being sixty, and the oldest man in the posse, his was the responsibility to take the lead in saying whether or not they would ride by night as well as by day. The others immediately fell in with what he had said, and thus it was settled.

"Seems to me the nigra's long-gone," offered Luther Larkin. "Seems he'd be out of the vicinity, mebbe even on his way to a northern state."

"I mos' respectfully diffah, Luthah," Hunnicutt said. "I'm convinced the nigra will try to git Princess ag'in because he is a mean, stubbohn nigra, an' he has got it in his ass to have that wench. Besides, Luthah—don' lose sight of the fac' that Royal has laid down a broad trail of rape an' muhdah. I don' undahstan' how we kin possibly considah that he's made any progress towahd a northern state . . . not considahin' the time he's spent molestin' white women an' killin' 'em, an' killin' white men, an' buryin' 'em."

"Youah right, Lee," Luther conceded. "I cleah lost sight of the facts foah a moment."

All the other men, even Vannice, were nodding. There was little talk from that moment on, as they addressed themselves to the food.

Hunnicutt, even though his objective for the day was to comb the far reaches of the nearby swamp for his runner, was uneasy. He left off eating, stared at his plate, felt a new conviction creep into him.

"Gent'men," he said quietly, after considering this, "of a sudden I kin almost smell insurrection."

To a man, his friends stopped eating.

"Why, Lee?" Vannice asked. "What do you base this on?"

"A feelin', suh," Hunnicutt replied. "But moah, too. I

ain' hiahed a white ovahseeah yet to replace Mistah Slocum, an' meantime two trusties has bin seein' to the plantation whilst I bin occupied with the hunt foah Royal. Now, me bein' so mad an' furious ovah what happened—my cousin Lida kilt, my ovahseah kilt, my bride shot—I didn' take into considahation what we all know very well. An' that is, a white man can't nevah trust a trusty. A trusty is all right when he got a white man to look up to but when he's put on his own, without any white man to rule him, that nigra blood takes ovah an' he reverts. He can't he'p it . . . it's his animal nigra nature. He ain' human—that's the entiah trouble—the nigra ain' a human bein' an' he can't be taught to be a human bein'. He's an animal that kin think jus' enough to git hisse'f . . . an' the white man . . . into trouble."

"Youah right, suh!" cried young Moorhead, his wiry body quivering. "An' them two trusties of youahs has had theah way foah a whole month!"

"Pretty much," Hunnicutt nodded, the assenting murmur around the table sounding good to his ears. "An' if you re-call, evah time we ride in, all the slaves is 'specially quiet. They don' come runnin' up to see who's comin' an' goin' . . . they don' do nothin' but stan' back quiet. Much too quiet."

"Like theah plottin'!" cried young Buford Estes. "You even said somethin' to that effect, Phil," he cried again. "You said these nigras look sullen!"

"This all may be true," Vannice put in, "but don' lose sight of the fact, gent'men, that the Hunnicutt Hill slaves at this time ain' themselves 'cause one of theah numbah is bein' hunted an' will be punished when captuahed. They wondahin' if they all goin' to be punished . . . made an example of. Theah simple min's can't grasp the true situation. The result is, theah frightened an' theah quiet."

Reluctantly, Hunnicutt had to agree. "Theah is truth in youah wohds, suh," he conceded. "Even though they can' learn to think right, not bein' human, they have somehow learned that the white man is the law, that the

mastah is the law unto the slave. They don' know why. They can't evah be taught to undahstan' that the white mastah has got to mete out the law because that is the on'y way the nigra kin be kep' in ohdah, the on'y way the plantation . . . the community . . . the entiah South kin be safe to live in."

"That's right, suh, Mistah Hunnicutt," cried young Moorhead. "Them stupid nigras'd kill evah white man in the South an' take ovah an' rendah it as dang'rous an' uncivilized as dahkest Africal!"

"That 'zactly what they want, in theah black heahs!" agreed Phil Estes excitedly. "Mebbe it'll be a he'p to all the Southlan', eventually, that Royal did run away! If theah's an insurrection in the makin', weah' right on the spot . . . gent'men, weah togethah . . . we kin make plans heah an' now to put down this insurrection!"

"If theah is one," Harold Vannice counseled. "Suppose, Lee, we weigh an' considah."

"An' aftah we weigh an' considah, suh," Hunnicutt agreed, angry excitement rising, "then we'll make a plan. Like Phil suggested."

"Theah are signs an' indications, Lee?" Vannice pressed.

"Yes, suh. The slaves are quiet, like I said, beyond the nohmal quiet in a situation when anothah slave has run away. They don' act scaihed—they act moah—secret. Like they know somethin' . . . like theah plottin' somethin'."

"Have you thought through what they might considah theah possible reasons foah insurrection?" Vannice asked.

"Nigras don' need a reason foah insurrection, you'll agree to that, suh," Hunnicutt replied. "It's the natuah of the black—to run away, to scheme ag'in his mastah, to rise up an' kill even a good mastah like all of us heah. An' fuhthah to kill ev'ry white he kin lay han's on."

"Theah's youah hot search foah Royal," young Moorhead interposed. "That's enough to make 'em think they got a reason."

"Plus bein' scaihed they'll be made an example of," added Buford Estes.

"I'm suah they usin' all them reasons," Hunnicutt agreed hotly. "Gent'men, I suggest we make a plan of ouah own to trap an' outwit the slaves of Hunnicutt Hill jus' in the event that they are plottin' an insurrection! Agreed?"

No one disagreed. A moment later they were leaning across the table, speaking in secret tones, speaking fast and with purpose.

"Howevah," Hunnicutt insisted at the end, "if we kin lay han's on Royal tonight an' I kin punish him to my own satisfaction, I'll demonstrate to all my blacks that no Hunnicutt Hill slave kin go ag'in the mastah. That in its'f will stop insurrection not on'y at Hunnicutt Hill, but will keep it f'um spreadin' to you gent'men's plantations as well."

Even as he waited for their agreement, which was slow in coming, but which did come, Lee Hunnicutt heard an unusual stir at the back of the house. Now a thready sound of voices reached him and he frowned. Things were indeed getting out of hand when Ginger permitted any sound whatsoever from her kitchen quarters to reach the main part of the house.

Now Ginger herself appeared at the dining room door and whispered to Bax. The old butler turned uncertainly toward Hunnicutt, who motioned irritably for Ginger to come to him at the table.

"What is it, Gingah?" he demanded when she reached his side. "What's goin' on in the kitchen? Speak out . . . these gent'men is my good frien's, an' these is unusual days. They got a right to know of all e-vents."

"Mastah Lee," the wench said, "theah's a buck at the kitchen doah. He's got two white boys with him, Mastah. He say he foun' 'em in Miss Lida's cottage."

"Bring them in heah," Hunnicutt ordered. He glanced around the table. "That all right with you, gent'men? This could have to do with what we bin discussin'."

All the men sat forward with interest.

The buck was a very black field worker of eighteen, lank and tall and lazy. Hunnicutt recognized him at once and determined to sell him off as soon as the present emergency had been dealt with.

The boys were two of those he'd seen at Sproul's shack. They even resembled their mother and their octo-roon sisters. He felt his blood go into a slow, angry pounding because he had been robbed of those wenches by death, by Royal, and because he had lost a thousand dollars on them.

"Youah Sprouls, ain' you?" he demanded of the older boy.

"Yes, sir . . . I'm Merle," said the lad. "This's Billy. He ain' but four."

"What you doin' heah?" Hunnicutt asked. "Youah fam'ly's dead, ain' it? How'd you git heah?"

"Me'n Billy wuz ketched by a great big nigger acrosst the river," Merle recited. "We got away f'um him an' crosst the river an' hid in a house."

"Wheah did the nigra go?" asked Hunnicutt.

"He is headin' fer Noo Orleens," the boy replied, his face sheet-white. "We got away f'um him."

"What'd he want with two white boys?" put in young Moorhead. "It don' make sense, suh!"

"He prob'ly figuahed nobody'd be expectin' him to be travelin' with white boys," Hunnicutt reasoned. "Was his name Royal?" he demanded of Merle.

"I c-couldn' say, suh. He t-tol' me the mistress here'd take keer of us."

"It was Royal, no mistake," growled Hunnicutt, his blood a beat of rage, slow and strong and enjoyable. "He used the boys, like I thought. You bin hidin' in that cottage . . . how long you bin hidin' theah?"

"C-couple days, suh."

"Wheah'd you git food?"

"P-Pansy . . ."

The boy cut off, his face turning from white to gray. His lips were quivering, almost blue in color.

Instantly Hunnicutt was convinced that not only had

Pansy seen these boys but had seen Royal as well. Probably the lanky field buck had seen him, too. "You three stan' right theah, an' you," he ordered the buck, "don' you go to sweatin' 'cause youah scaihed an' stink up my dinin' room."

"Y-yassuh!" moaned the buck and rolled his eyes.

"Git Pansy," Hunnicutt ordered Ginger. "Git huh fas'l"

As soon as Pansy, rounded chin quivering, big eyes swimming with tears, stood before him with the buck and the boys, Hunnicutt got to his feet. "Tell me," he said, his voice ominously soft and pulsing, "wheah Royal is."

"I don' know, Mastah Leel" Pansy cried.

Hunnicutt turned on the buck and got the same answer. He turned on Merle and the same answer came from the boy. "I don' know," was all he heard, no matter how many times he asked, how many times he demanded and threatened.

He itched and ached to tear the cringing black buck asunder; he burned to rip the breasts off the wench who would not talk; he could scarcely keep his hands off the stubborn white trash boy who needed, at the least, the thrashing of his life.

But he dared not resort to violence in the presence of his friends, whose good opinion he valued. So, because it seemed the course most likely to bring results, he kept pounding questions at Merle.

At last the frightened lad told how Royal had joined their wagon. Later he let slip that he had heard Royal talking about guns for all the slaves.

"Heah that, gent'men?" Hunnicutt cried. "Heah that?" he cried to the two slaves. "Now weah gittin' someplace! You'll tell me 'bout the guns or I'll have you tohn limb f'um limb!"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The slaves continued to deny all knowledge of Royal or any guns. Hunnicutt pressed his questions, repeated his threats. Finally, rage pounding in him, he turned to his neighbors, threw his hands wide in a gesture of defeat.

"You see, gent'men!" he cried. "I have no choicel These two blacks know somethin' . . . they very likely know wheah Royal is at this moment! They undoubtedly have bin he'pin' him! You have heahd me beg an' plead an' request an' demand that they tell me 'bout that slave. An' you have seen theah stubbohn lack of response an' you have heahd them lie an' say they don' know nothin' 'bout eithah Royal or the guns! You my witnesses . . . you have seen an' heard an' you know theah ain' but the one co'se of action lef open to me—chastisemint!"

"That's right!" exclaimed young Moorhead. "Ain' it, gent'men . . . I put it to you, Mistah Vannice, suh, as the eldest an' mos' respected an' honahed gent'man present, ain' it true what Mistah Hunnicutt said? That the on'y co'se of action lef to him is chastisemint?"

Hunnicutt and the others awaited Vannice's response. The room was silent. Into the silence came the deep, rough, frightened panting of the lanky young buck and the quiet mewling of the wench.

"I have to agree," Vannice said. "When slaves are as open to suspicion as these two, an' when theah mastah has given them ev'ry opportunity to speak out an' tell what they know, he has to ohdah them to speak. Then, when they still refuse, he can do nothin' else than use fo'ce. Since the mastah is the law on the plantation, when all else fails, then he has got to use fo'ce to restoah

or maintain ohdah. It is bettah that two slaves be punished than that the entiah plantation . . . even the countryside . . . suffah."

"To the stable," Hunnicutt ordered. He stepped to the sideboard, opened a drawer and took out a pistol. "Gentlemen, please follow. I'll git my trusties to he'p in the stable. You," he ordered Merle, "stay in heah with Gingham an' youah brothah. Bax, you come with us."

Hunnicutt was aware that they made an impressive procession on the march from the tall white house to the big stable. First, in fear and shaking, walked the buck and the wench. Behind them walked Bax, the dignified old butler. After him came Hunnicutt, pistol held on all the blacks. Then, single file, followed the seven white men of his posse.

Into the stable the procession went. Wink, the small and wiry stableman, was sweeping the puncheon floor space which would have served as carriage-way if they had a carriage. Hunnicutt wondered, irritably, if the black ever did anything other than sweep.

"Mawnin', Mastah Lee," Wink said, eyes rolling at all the people who had entered. His besom stopped, then began to move again, very slowly.

Hunnicutt's black stallion, Fury whickered. Some of the other horses whickered from their stalls, but Hunnicutt didn't go to rub their noses. Outside in the stableyard cocks crowed and hens cackled afterward.

"Wink," Hunnicutt ordered, "git these two blacks to shuck down. Then spancel 'em. Wrap the buck's chain aroun' that centah post, an' the wench's chain a couple posts f'um him."

"Yas, Mastah Lee," said the stableman. "Whut's a 'couple', Mastah Lee, suh? Dat three, ain't it?"

"Hell an' damnation!" Hunnicutt roared, anger making his entire neck, face and head hot. "How stupid kin even a nigra git? It's two, not three! Kin you figah out two posts f'um the buck? Or you wan' some whippin', aftah I gits through with them?"

"Oh Mastah . . . Wink know now!" cried the stable-

man desperately. "A 'couple' is two . . . two . . . twol Mastah Lee don' haf to whup Wink to he'p him remembah . . . Wink smaht . . . Wink remembah all by hisse'fl"

As he singsonged, making it sound like a prayer for mercy, Hunnicutt was angered into considering spangling him also and giving him ten lashes just to show him he couldn't get away with anything, not even with stupidity. But there was the bad impression such an action might make on Vannice and the others. Also, he had urgent matters to attend—a runaway slave to catch and punish, his gold to recover, a very possible insurrection to uncover and quell. Giving Wink ten lashes could be done any time.

He watched while the little stableman fastened the chains around the naked buck's wrists. The buck's arms were pulled behind him so they encircled the post, and the chain was locked around the post. Wink next repeated the process with Pansy who stood weeping and nude and comely.

Arthur Stone had worked his way unobtrusively to Hunnicutt. "What you plannin' to do 'bout all the othah blacks durin' the punishmint?" he asked. "They safe away in the fiel's, ain' they?"

"I'm glad you mentioned that," Hunnicutt said. "I'm so furious an' upset, it a fine thing I got my frien's to he'p me think of ev'rything I ought to think of. If I have all the othah blacks locked into the pens," he speculated, "they'll know somethin's afoot. If I jus' have the trusties come to the stable, an' if we gag these two culprits so they can't make no noise, theah'll be no way the othah slaves kin know anythin' out of the ordinary's takin' place. When the trusties don' come to prod 'em to w'uk, they'll set down in the rows an' go to sleep, way nigras will if you don' keep right in aftah 'em, but that don' mattah. The trusties'll be back in a shake, an' they'll wu'k ag'in. So—that's how we'll do it."

He motioned to Bax to come to his side. When the old butler arrived he said, "Fetch the trusties . . . Cat an'

Bone. Speak to 'em private an' tell 'em to come quiet an' you come back with 'em. If you tell any one of them slaves theah's a punishment afoot, I'll have you lashed . . . you undahstan'?"

"Yes, Mastah Lee, I undahstan'," the old butler said with dignity. "I'll do what you say."

"That's fine," Hunnicutt approved. "Now . . . git!" He turned and shouted at Wink. "An' you . . . fetch the fixin's! Bring me a paddle this time, 'stead of the black-snake! An' make it quick!"

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Wink went trotting to the little boxed-off room which was used for storage, trotted back with paddle, jug and crock and rags. His face quivered with a constant smile. Just hoping he was in the master's good graces, Hunnicutt thought. Not even sense enough in his black skull to be sad because two of his own were going to get the paddle. They ain't nothing but animals, he thought, they really ain't.

Wink set the crock and jug on a box he dragged up. He laid the rags down, then worked the corn cob out of the mouth of the jug.

"Mastah wan' Wink to open the pimentade an' poah it now?" he quavered.

"Not yet," Hunnicutt said. "Shake it good. Git the pepah off the bottom, like always, an' mix it an' the salt through the tuhpentine good. Don' git no curry comb . . . I don' wan' to mahk up the wench puhmanent, an' I got somethin' diff runt in min' foah the buck . . . no strap. Fetch two of them biggest ho'ses . . . bridle 'em an' rig 'em out like I showed you."

Wink began trembling, his mouth shaking all over his face.

Hunnicutt glanced at his gathered, waiting friends, who looked solemn and expectant. "Wink knows what I got in min', an' he's impressed," he said. "The method I'm fixin' to use on the buck was used by the Vikings, back in hist'ry."

He wheeled on Wink. "Hell an' damnation!" he roared. "Ain' you stahted yet? You act like you bin lashed daily, evah time I speak! Foah a nigra that's nevah had the lash laid on his wuthless black hide even so much as one

time, you give my frien's the impression I'm a cruel mastah!"

"No suh, Mastah Lee . . . youah a kin' mastah!" choked Wink.

"Don' be concerned, suh," said young Moorhead. "We all know what nigras is like. We all got the same problem."

There was a stir at the stable door and Cat and Bone came in, the butler behind them. Wink was trotting about the stalls, putting bridles and chains on two powerful horses.

"Shut them doahs, Cat," Hunnicutt ordered. "Don' wan' any of the blacks in the fiel's or anybody up at the house to heah this paddlin'. Nor anybody passin' on the rivah, eithah, whey they yells an' laments. They might git the idea we cruel heah at Hunnicutt Hill. To make suah they ain' no noise, you an' Bone take some them clean pimentade rags an' gag these two."

Cat shut the doors. Grayness and gloom settled over the cavern-like interior of the stable. Then Cat rammed a gag into the wench's mouth and tied it in place. Bone did the same with the buck. Now the only sound in the stable was their muffled moans and the clop of the horses' hooves as Wink led them into the carriage-way.

"Tie 'em to a couple posts 'til we see we need 'em," Hunnicutt said. "Then han' me the paddle."

The stableman hastened to obey, his face aquiver. Hunnicutt accepted the big paddle from him. It was brand new and made of sole leather with holes drilled through it, fastened to a sturdy handle.

"It a fine paddle," Hunnicutt announced, hefting it. "Sometimes I can' decide which Silas makes best down at his shoe shop—paddles or sandals or whips." He passed the paddle to Cat. "You do the honahs. Ten strokes foah the wench, then stop an' we'll see is she ready to talk."

Cat took the paddle, tucked it under one arm, ran his hands over Pansy's belly and thighs, tested her buttocks.

"She ain' too sof'," he said, "but she ain' hahd like a buck. How hahd you wan' I should hit huh, Mastah Lee?"

"Stan' off f'um huh," Hunnicutt instructed the trusty. "I don' wan' huh mahked up, undahstan'. Aim foah huh buttocks . . . don' hit huh back, an' don' go neah huh front. Don' hit huh tits . . . they stan' out so good . . . in the belly. Don' do nothin' that'll keep huh f'um breedin'. Kin you remembah all that an' wh'up huh too?"

"Yas suh, Mastah. I reckon I kin."

"I'll tell you when to commence an' when to quit," Hunnicutt said. He stepped back from the gagged and writhing wench, whose eyes were frantic and pleading. There was an uneasiness in his stomach which wasn't surprising considering what he'd been through since Royal had escaped.

"Commence!" he ordered.

Cat stood spraddle-legged and raised his paddle, judging the distance from the shuddering mulatto female buttocks. He had no expression whatsoever on his black face. He slapped Pansy's bottom smartly with the paddle, causing her to leap away from him as far as her spanceled hands would permit. The next two slaps set her to dancing back and forth.

"That the bes' you kin do?" Hunnicutt demanded. "You goin' to waste the strokes? You got no powah? You act like you don' wan' to wh'up huh! Mebbe you need a few licks on youah own hide! 'Cause she's a wench don' make no diff'rence."

Cat now gave Pansy a blow that knocked her to her knees. While she was struggling to scramble up, he laid the paddle on her upthrust buttocks in a stronger blow. There was a strangled moan from behind the gag and her brown hands thrust against the floor, hoisting her to her knees, her feet. The next blow slammed her back to her knees, then to her belly, where she remained.

Now the paddle fell at regular intervals, kept time with the deep and heavy thud of Hunnicutt's pulse. The thudding got into his privates and his organ began to swell and thud in time to the blows.

"Keep going," he told the buck. "Make it ten aftah this one!"

The smack of heavy leather on wench-flesh made a deep slapping sound as if the flesh gave under each blow. Hunnicutt knew the wench was holding her muscles tight but even so there were small cuts after the first five blows, and then the flesh sprang through the holes in the paddle, riding tiny spurts of blood. Hunnicutt's stomach twisted and his organ mounded.

"Hold it a minute," he told Cat, "that's ten." On the pretense of giving the quivering, sobbing wench on the puncheon floor an opportunity to think, Hunnicutt swallowed to control his stomach and clasped his hands together, as he had done at other whippings, to press the front of his trousers flat. But, as ever, he couldn't stop that dull, turgid throbbing.

Pansy was still weeping, the tears rolling into the rag tied around mouth and jaw. Sweat covered her face, shoulders and breasts and was streaming down her back into her bloodied buttocks.

"You willin' to talk now?" Hunnicutt asked. "You wilin' to tell me 'bout guns . . . is theah guns hid on this plantation, or not?"

He watched Pansy move her head slowly in negation. "Stan' huh up . . . give huh five moah strokes!" he told Cat. "An' make 'em hahdah this time!"

The trusty lifted the wench to her feet, resumed the paddling. Hunnicutt counted mentally—one . . . two . . . three . . . and wondered, desperately, if he could contain his sap . . . four . . . five . . . and sucked in his belly and tensed his body and somehow contained himself. "Talk!" he roared. "Tell 'bout the guns!"

"Lee," Vannice said, "the wench has fainted. She can't heah you."

"Slop that pimentade on huh, Bone!" Hunnicutt ordered. "Git it into evah cut an' cranny . . . that'll bring huh to . . . I ain' seen it fail yet!"

The tall trusty swung up the jug, gave it a shake, then poured the fiery liquid generously over the cut and

bleeding buttocks. Instantly Pansy began to stir, to thrash from side to side, her glazed eyes coming open and staring wildly.

"You wan' that gag out of youah mouth, wench?" Hunnicutt demanded.

Vigorously she nodded.

"You ready to tell 'bout the guns?"

Slowly, she shook her head.

"You wan' the gag out, don' you?"

Again, the nod.

"Theah is guns . . . ain' theah?"

Again, the negation.

"If I have the gag taken out, kin you tell me 'bout the guns?"

Once more, the negation.

"Drown huh with pimentadel" Hunnicutt ordered. "Use evah drop of it! We'll see kin she talk guns or can't she talk guns!"

"Lee," interposed Vannice, "she'll lose consciousness an' won' be able to talk at all."

"Wait on the pimentade," Hunnicutt said. He turned to Vannice. "Suh," he responded through his hot haze of rage at the stubborn wench, at the spanceled back, at the whole plantation full of black animals with whom he was saddled and who at this moment were undoubtedly plotting to rise up and kill him and his friends, "if she can't or won't talk 'bout guns, I ain' goin' to let huh live to talk 'bout anythin'. The time is heah, an' you will have to admit it is heah, suh, that I, as mastah of Hunnicutt Hill, have got to make an example of these two blacks if they puhsist in not confessin' to the insurrection they are obviously plottin'."

"I can't deny that the situation is serious," Vannice admitted.

The others spoke in agreement, young Moorhead's voice strongest.

"What I am goin' to do to them is what I have got to do," Hunnicutt told Vannice, the others, the slaves. "It's up to these two blacks if I do it or not. All they got to do

is confess an' tell me what they know." He gestured to the trusties. "Bone, set down that jug. He'p the wench to huh feet. Pansy, when he gits you on youah feet, you stan' up . . . don' go fallin' down . . . it'll be a sign you wan' some moah paddle if you do. Cat, stan' the buck beside the wench. Unspancel 'em f'um the posts, then spancel his right wrist to huh lef' wrist, an' his right ankle to huh lef' ankle. Nex', spancel 'em togethah at the uppah arm, the waist an' the knees. Last of all, spancel 'em togethah at the neck. Evah place you spancel 'em, leave a length of chain dangle on theah outside. We goin' to make use of those danglin' ends."

The watching whites stood while the trusties carried out the directions. Wink, the stableman and Bax, the butler, stood staring. The only sounds were the clank of chain and the restless moving of the two chain-rigged horses.

When his orders had been carried out, Hunnicutt stood in front of his gagged and spanceled slaves. "You see them big ho'ses tied to the posts?" he asked.

They nodded, Pansy weakly, the buck ponderously.

"When I have one ho'se stood beside each of you," Hunnicutt told them, "theah will be a chain on his huh-ness that matches up with each of the danglin' chains on youah bodies. Each of the chains on the ho'se has a lock to fasten it to the matchin' chain on youah bodies. An' that's what I'm goin' to have my trusties do . . . hitch them ho'ses to you. Unless youah ready to tell me 'bout wheah Royal is hidin', an' 'bout the insurrection an' the guns."

"Gad, Leel" ejaculated Vannice. "How can you make such a threat—what have you got in mind?"

"Somethin' classic, suh, I assuah you," Hunnicutt replied. "Well?" he asked Pansy. "You ready to talk?" She shook her head, eyes staring and miserable. Then he demanded of the buck, "You. Goin' to talk?" And the buck shook his head, for all the world as though he knew nothing about which he could talk.

"Hitch the ho'ses to 'em," Hunnicutt told the trusties.

The hooves made a loud noise as the horses were walked to position. Their dangling chains swung and rattled, where before they had been noiseless. The locks snapped sharply as they were closed.

"Now, I'll explain how this wuhks," Hunnicutt said, addressing the culprit blacks, a sickness in his stomach but along with it the knowledge that he had to go on. He had started to make an example of these blacks and if they didn't cooperate, it was carry through with what he had started or have a full-size rebellion on his hands for sure. Have death and ruination for himself and his friends and even more, the way such things could grow and rush out of all control. "I'll tell you how it wuhks," he repeated, girding himself to relate its horror.

"Undahstan' you kin prevent it's happenin' by talkin'," he said. "Jus' nod youah head an' I'll undahstan'. Nod at any time, eithah one of you, an' the entiah procedure will be halted an' the gag taken out of youah mouth an' if you tell me what I mus' know, you'll live. You undahstan', both of you?"

Slowly, they nodded.

"You goin' to talk now?"

Slowly they shook their heads.

"Very well," Hunnicutt said, the throb in his manhood growing, growing. "Now this punishmint the Vikings . . . men who lived 'way back in hist'ry . . . used on men like you who rebelled ag'in the gov'nmint. An' you two are goin' ag'in the gov'nmint of Hunnicutt Hill when you refuse to tell me, youah mastah, what I need to know 'bout my runaway slave an' insurrection an' guns. You undahstan' that?"

Again the nod.

"You wan' to talk?"

Again the negation.

"Well, what the Vikings done was they took the men who rebelled, an' they were tohn asundah by ho'ses driven apaht . . . that means they were tohn into pieces by ho'ses driven away f'um each othah. You undahstan' that, too?"

The eyes were still terrified, rolling wildly now, seeking help, any help. Hunnicutt's sickness in the belly, the necessity to carry on, to carry through, went into that growing throb, that pulsing, aching sap threatening to profane itself, here and now.

"You goin' to talk," he screamed, "or not?"

The heads shook, the eyes rolled.

"Mount them ho'ses . . . you Cat . . . you Bone!" shouted Hunnicutt in the extremity of his necessity. No sooner had they bestrode the horses than his hand lifted. "When I drop my han'," he yelled, "Cat, you ride at a gallop towahd the front of the stable, an' Bone, you ride at a gallop towahd the back of the stable!"

"Lee . . . foah God's sake!" cried Vannice. "Not now . . . youah bride's in the doahway!"

Just as the spanceled buck nodded, Hunnicutt's hand yanked down in the prearranged signal. He saw the two powerful horses lunge in their allotted directions even as he cried out to stop them, saw the two nude black bodies torn asunder, saw the blood shoot and spurt and puddle. And then he closed his eyes, for his aching sap burst forth and pumped freely, beyond his control. Only when it ended did he open his eyes and, after one glance at the sundered, blood-soaked remains, turned to his friends. To a man they were ashen and shaken.

"He nodded," Vannice said, "but too late . . . too late."

"Don' blame youahse'f suh," said young Moorhead. "You tried to save him . . . he didn' nod quick enough."

"Nex'," Hunnicutt said, "I'm havin' blacks brought in heah, two at a time. Because he nodded, I know theah's insurrection at Hunnicutt Hill! I'm goin' to use this Viking method on my blacks until I fin' one . . . jus' one . . . that'll talk in time!"

"Lee," Vannice protested, "don' let this drive you mad, son!"

And the other men surrounded him, even the blades, and protested hotly the course he meant to pursue.

He became aware that Frances was pushing her way

to him. She was white as death and trembling visibly. "Lee Hunnicutt," she said clearly, "I'm going to ask your friends to shut you in the jail . . . like any slave . . . until you get control of your mind again! And they'll do it, too—won't you, gentlemen?"

Hunnicutt felt Vannice's arm go across his shoulders. "Lee don' need manhandlin', ma'am," he said. "He'll cool down . . . we've got a secret plan he himse'f he'ped to devise. The minute he stops to think, he'll recognize it is now time to carry out that plan."

CHAPTER TWENTY

Though bone-furious at the interference, Hunnicutt heeded the arguments of his Yankee bride and of the older man. He heeded all the other men as they urged him to abide by their plan.

Young Moorhead, as usual, was loudest, though this time on the side of prudence. "The plan's the thing, suh!" he declared. "But fust may I respectfully suggest that we search foah possible hidden weapons?"

"Wheah?" demanded Hunnicutt. "Wheah do we search?"

"Evah place, suh . . . in the quahtahs . . . in the plantation house . . . in the swamp. If an insurrection is in the makin', foah us to fin' an' confiscate the weapons will end it befoah it commences."

"It would also cancel the secret plan," put in Arthur Stone. "Puhhaps save any fuhthah bloodshed. Save you money in slaves, Lee. Save us time, an' relieve ouah min's about whethah we got to feah insurrection on ouah own plantations."

"Thus, to fin' the guns—if they exist," Vannice offered, "is moah impohtant at this moment than to fin' the run-away slave. Once the dangah of rebellion is ovahcome, the slave will be a simplah mattah with which to deal."

"What about it, Lee?" asked Frances, her body tense now, trembling gone. "Somehow, I'm going to see to it there is no more killing!"

"She's right, Lee," Vannice said.

Reluctantly, partly because he knew his friends were right about the weapons but mostly because he didn't want to lose face, Hunnicutt nodded. "It's settled," he said. "We'll search foah guns. But my deah," he contin-

ued, addressing his bride, "we cannot assuah you of no moah killin' whatsoevah, foah if these blacks have got guns, an' if they commence shootin' those guns, theah is goin' to be a lot of killin' an' nobody can prevent it."

She inclined her head, accepting the truth of his statement.

He gestured to the trusties. "Bury what's lef' of the wench an' the buck," he ordered. And then he strode out of the stable in company with his neighbors. "Youah in chahge while I'm searchin' foah guns," he called back.

His rage had abated but it had not cooled. It burned deep and hot. He would press on after Royal, despite any hazard. He would go for that runaway through the hottest fire of insurrection. All he wanted was to get his hand on that nigra, to work his well-earned revenge.

He made for the plantation house with his friends. Now that he'd been forced to slow down a bit, he was of the opinion that Royal was holed up somewhere with the weapons. This meant that Hunnicutt and the other men would have to go in shooting, wherever it was, to get either Royal or the weapons.

Beyond all else, Hunnicutt feared that Royal would be killed before he himself could take, punish and execute the black. He halted in mid-step. "Stop!" he cried.

The others surrounded him. He saw Frances coming slowly up.

"Fu'st, we'll search the stable an' the quahtahs," he said, "then the plantation house. Nex' we'll search Lida's old cottage, an' aftah that, the swamp! If he's hidin' any-place with the weapons, we've got him!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Royal had hidden under the bed in the second bedroom when the buck discovered the two white boys in Lida's cottage. As soon as they had gone, Merle and Pansy protesting, and little Billy crying, he came out from under the bed, mind working fast.

He'd have to move the rifles and shot, Merle, while a reliable lad, was very young and was almost certain to drop some word which would alert Hunnicutt to the proposed uprising. Hunnicutt, naturally, would immediately start a search for weapons. Knowledge that the boys had been found in Lida's cottage and the story Merle would tell about escaping from a big Negro, would center the master's attention on the cottage and he would certainly search it keenly.

Carrying bundles of rifles and bags of shot, Royal made quick trip after quick trip between the cottage and the cave he had found earlier. He piled rifles and shot far to the back with the saddlebags. There was nothing with which to cover them. After the last trip, he pulled a sizable rock to one side of the small opening, already well hidden by the bramble bushes.

It was possible white searchers would miss the cave altogether. Ebon knew where it was, Royal having told him how to get to it. Thus, if Royal were prevented, in some manner, from dealing out rifles, shot and gold, Ebon could take over.

He had no more than finished transporting everything and returned to the cottage to meet anyone who might come to bring him news, than one of Ebon's henchmen appeared to report what had taken place in the stable and what was then happening at the plantation house.

"Dey's still lookin' foah guns in de quahtahs," the buck confided. "Dey's set an' de-termined to fin' de guns an' kill evah slave at Hunnicutt Hill wif dem!"

"The guns are safe," Royal assured him. "You tell Ebon the transfer has been made."

"De whut?" gaped the black.

"Tell him he knows where to find the guns . . . they've been moved."

"I do it!" nodded the buck and went trotting away, through the swamp, following the little road.

Unarmed except for his knife, Royal went into the swamp, avoiding the vicinity of the cave where he had left his own rifle and pistol. He followed a swamp stream, coming to rest only when he was in the deepest, thickest growth, where the strongest light was dim green sunlight. Here he squatted on his haunches and listened.

He listened into deeper swamp, listened through swamp toward the plantation, listened with his ears and pores and nose, with all his being. And there was nothing but the velvet, damp, hot, humid, steaming swamp silence. There was the leisurely lap of water, the turgid leap of a fish, the shrill of some small bug, subdued bird-twitter.

After the sunlight grew darker, came the first thread of sound. It came from the direction of the plantation house and seemed to be wisping toward Lida's cottage. When it grew into a tangible, shimmering thread, Royal selected a sturdy reed, cut off both ends, and slid into the deepest part of the swamp stream next to shore and waited, the water circling his neck and lapping under his chin.

Now he could make out voices, a chorus of voices, but not words. They were at Lida's cottage. They were searching it for arms, gold. For him. Hunnicutt would never give up until he captured Royal or was killed by Royal. And Royal would not be taken alive. If Hunnicutt tried to take him, he would kill Hunnicutt, even though he himself was killed as a result.

The voices grew stronger; they were coming this way.

Royal gripped one end of the reed between his teeth and submerged. He lay alongside the bank, under an overhang of trees. He held himself on the mud bed of the stream on his back, gripping a tree root, and sucked air through the reed. This protruded only inches above the surface of the water amid the reeds growing there.

Sounds reached him, human sounds. They were muffled and as in a dream, here under the water. The men were tramping alongbank.

"Ain' no sense lookin' in all them hollow trees," he heard one man call. "That's a smaht nigra . . . he'll know it kin rain into a hollow tree an' rust a rifle an' wet the shot!"

"Wheah the hell you think the guns is hid, then?" another called back. "They ain' in the stables or the quah-tahs or the house or the cottagel!"

"They boun' to be in this swamp!" yelled a voice that Royal recognized as the master's voice. "I wouldn' put it past him to dig a hole an' bury 'em! He ain' all that smaht he can' make a mistake! He ain' no great min' . . . he ain' but a nigral!"

"Lee's right," said a voice almost directly over Royal. "Mebbe the nigra ain' so smaht."

"He won' be 'roun' heah," said another. "Besides, we ain' lookin' foah him . . . weah lookin' foah guns."

"That's right," Hunnicutts voice said. "The guns suah ain' in the watah or this paht of the swamp. Even a nigra'd know bettah than to git guns wet when he may need to use 'em."

Royal lay motionless. The men moved away, their voices dying away. He lay a long while, breathing through his reed. Were they searching for a possible cave? Apparently Hunnicutt knew nothing of the small cave, since they had not found the rifles. Would they stumble across the spot?

He reasoned that they would probably continue to search the swamp and its environs until dark. At this time, he hoped, they would return to the plantation house to eat and the uprising could be implemented. It

was then that it would be safe for him to leave the water. It was then that he must be ready for whatever came next.

He was relieved that Hunnicutt had not as yet brought dogs into the search but at the same time knew it would not be long before the white master did just that. Probably tonight the master would send for the keenest pack of hounds obtainable and set them on the trail. The only reason he had not done so before, Royal believed, was that Royal himself was thought by most to be abroad, some distance from Hunnicutt Hill, possibly trying to get back to the plantation.

At last, when the water above him was full black, he let himself rise to the surface. He remained there in new darkness, listening. There was no sound but the usual night sound of the swamp. The loudest thing was the rising beat of the frogs.

Now he moved out of the stream and onto the pathway, water running off his clothes onto the ground. He'd return to Lida's cottage, find something to dry himself with, find dry clothes or at least let his own clothing dry a bit. The cottage should be safe, for the men had searched it. They wouldn't expect him to be there now.

It was dusk dark as he crept to the house, reconnoitered and entered. It was indeed deserted. He found a towel and dried himself, rubbing his wet clothing to rid it of as much water as he could. There were no men's garments here. He recalled that Lida had told him that, had smiled admiringly and said that no such garments would be large enough for him anyhow, he was so fine and big.

As soon as it was black dark, with only a few stars winking, before the moon had lifted its sliver, he went swiftly along the little road which led from cottage to quarters. Through the darkness he walked, aware of the black verdance of grass, tree and bush, under willows, past the black bayou filled with black night water hyacinths, on to the quarters.

He stopped in the fringe of swamp at the edge of the

quarters and listened. Just beyond, just two long strides away, began the first stud pens. There was no sound—none from the big house, none from the stable, none from the pens. There was no sign of Cat and Bone who locked the slaves in the pens at night and were supposed to stand watch until they themselves were locked in.

Stealthily, Royal moved. Stealthily, he slipped to the pen in which Ebon was kept. Someone was at the back, barred window hole.

"It's me . . . Silas," the someone whispered. "That you, Royal?"

He crouched at the window. "The keys," he whispered.

Immediately he felt a key in his fingers. "One key fits all de locks," Silas whispered. "I made moah . . . had the smithy make moah. Then moah than one of us kin unlock the pens. Is the time heah, Royal . . . is it?"

"It's getting close," Royal whispered back. "I don't know exactly when, but stand ready."

He crept away from the window to the back corner, where he waited. Nothing stirred. Stealthily he moved along the side of the pen, to the front corner, peered around it. No one—nothing. Swiftly, in shadow-silence, he was at the door, sliding a key into the padlock, opening the door a crack. Then he was inside, the door pulled shut behind him.

"Ebon . . . Guy," he whispered. "Bring your three helpers. The six of us will fetch the rifles and shot and pass them out."

"We comin'," whispered Ebon.

Royal stood to one side of the door while the five shadows stole into the night. "Meet me at the edge of the swamp," he whispered, and when the last one had gone, whispered to the slaves, "be ready . . . whenever we come back . . . be ready." And then he relocked the door and hastened to his companions.

"Why'd you lock the pen?" demanded Guy in a belligerent whisper. "Now it'll have to be unlocked when we git back."

"I locked it in case the mastah comes back to it," Royal

whispered. "Theah'll be no unlocked doahs to make him suspicious, which means he won't see any reason to light a lantahn and make a head-count. The five of you won't be missed."

There was movement nearby. Royal went stiff, scalp prickling. Around him he felt his fellow slaves ready to spring, to kill.

He put out his hand, laid it on the nearest arm and pressed warningly.

The movement came again and someone whispered, "It's me . . . Princess. Who's there?"

One stride and Royal had his arms around her, drawing her into the group. Every sense was quivering. She might have been sent as innocent, unsuspecting decoy. The master and his posse might be only a step away.

Princess sensed his alarm. "I'm alone," she whispered. "The mastah and his friends are searching toward New Orleans. The mistress got a key to the attic and let me out. She said the mastah thinks there is an insurrection here, that you are here. She said if that is true, she wants me free to run with the rest of you."

Unabashed by his fellow conspirators, Royal held his empress. She was vibrant and warm, and she was with him at last. Every instinct cried out to flee with her, here and now, to wait for nothing. But he could not.

All the slaves of Hunnicutt Hill were depending upon him to lead them to freedom. At this very moment they were waiting for the rifles he would put into their hands, for the gold he would give to sustain them . . . those who succeeded in reaching the North.

He owed them his loyalty. In a way they were his new tribe in this great tribe of Louisiana. After he had helped them, then and only then, could he honestly be free to return to his empire in Africa.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

"Come," Royal whispered to his love, to his fellows.

Stealthily, swiftly he led into the swamp, to the small road and along it. Past Lida's cottage, silvery in starshine and weak moon. On past it, off the road, through the swamp again, on. Six men they were, and one woman, treading the treacherous swamp, in darkness risking quicksand and snake.

At the hidden mouth of the cave, Royal halted. "You two . . . Ebon and Guy," he whispered, "divide the rifles into six piles. Tie them together to pack on our backs. Put out as much shot as we can carry. Divide the gold into six piles and tie it into the cloths Pansy brought. We'll each carry rifles, a bag of shot and a bag of gold. We'll be loaded down but we've got to manage."

The men put aside the rock, held aside the bramble bushes, entered the cave. Royal heard the scratch of a match, smelled the sulphur and knew that Ebon was lighting the lantern which Royal had brought.

"Come," he whispered to Princess, "this is our time."

She slipped her hand into his, and together they stole further into the swamp.

Picking his way carefully, wary of rattlers and moccasins, he moved through almost-inky blackness, coming to a halt under a tree. Standing on a bed of moss, he held her so that the womanliness of her body fitted the male-ness of his.

He felt his organ lift, felt the beat of his Mandingo blood. He heard her gasp softly, felt her stir and her hands caress the back of his neck. He moved his hand slowly and lovingly up and down her back, followed the curve of thigh up it again, to her cheek.

"Why are we here?" she asked.

"Because you are my empress," he whispered. "Because we are together . . . for all our years or for this moment only. Because after tonight I may nevah see you again . . . because, if I am killed tonight, I want my seed in you. So that you will take my seed which is within your belly back to Mandingo-land and bring forth my son, and when he is a man he will rule our people."

She sighed and her breath quivered and he knew that her heart quivered as well. "Yes," she whispered, "oh, yes!"

Together they sank onto their bed of moss. Together they opened their loins to each other. His pulsing organ entered her even as she encompassed him, thus making their coupling an act they did together. Together they moved and swelled with love and tenderness and the desire to make their son and for an instant the son was forgotten and there was only the love. There was only the rich, satisfying movement, the growing man-part, the welcoming, hungering woman-part. And at the end came completion, pure love one for the other and utter satisfaction.

"Again," Princess pleaded, "once more!"

Thus again, without withdrawing, came the love, the perfection. They clung for a moment . . . maybe two moments . . . cradled in each other's bodies.

It was Royal who pulled away. "The othahs must be waiting," he whispered.

In the cave, they found the five bucks tying bundles of rifles together.

"Royal," Ebon whispered, "I got to tell you that some bucks are talkin' scaihed of the uprisin'."

"Do they think they'll drop out?" Royal asked.

"Some will, some won't."

"Do you think any of them will inform on us?"

"In ouah pen," Guy whispered importantly, "some of 'em b'lieves if dey do infohm, dey not be punish' by de Mastah. Dey b'lieves too dat if de uprisin' stahts an' fails,

dey all be whipped, some of 'em toah up like Pansy an' de buck, an' some of 'em kilt othah ways."

"Theah is some of that talk in the fiel's too," Ebon said. "But on'y today . . . that's the fu'st."

"Then every one of those must be spanceled, gagged and locked up before we leave," Royal said. "Two of you will go into a pen armed and deal first with these slaves. Then you'll give out rifles and shot. The white men will be disposed of the same way when they return."

Inwardly, Royal was repelled at the idea of treating any man, black or white, in such manner. But if the great majority of the slaves, all of whom hungered for freedom, were to succeed, it must be done.

Suddenly Guy muscled up to Royal. "Give me haf' dis gol'," he demanded, "an' ah'll fo'ce evah slave to keep he mouf shet. If you don' give me haf' de gol', den Ah'll he'p dem slaves dat don' wan' no trubble an' when you need all de he'p you kin git, me an' dem'll be fightin' on de side of de mastah."

"You haven't time to force the timid slaves," Royal reasoned. "They need to make up their own minds, anyhow. If they'd rather stay heah, that's their right."

"They so crushed by slavery," Ebon put in, "they ain' got no min' but the mastah's min'."

"Ah wan's haf' de gol', jus' de same," persisted Guy.

"You'll get your share," Royal told him, "and not one dollah more. Divided evenly, every slave and his family will have enough to travel North and buy food until they find work. If you take half, most of them would be like wild animals trapped in the swamp."

"An' you'll be one of 'em!" Guy snarled. "'Cause ah'm goin' to kill you daid!"

The mammoth fighter hurled himself upon Royal, hammering down both fists in that sledge-like manner he had. One crashed Royal full above the ear, the other chopped him over the kidney, sending him backward so hard he came up against the wall of the cave. Royal hurtled toward Guy, slamming one fist into the ribs, the other

over the heart. Guy grunted deeply and gave way. Royal closed in, slugging him on the side of the head, the back of the neck, the nose.

Guy stopped, still doubled. Suddenly he side-stepped and, as Royal wheeled, crashed one tremendous fist into Royal's windpipe, the other into his belly, at the same time kicking him in the groin. The kick slammed Royal to the floor of the cave, folded with pain. He lunged to his feet but Guy came at him, a battering ram of rage and power, and crashed him to the floor again.

They rolled, legs wrapped around each other, fists going. Again, as that night a month ago, Royal felt himself revert to the jungle, this time joyously. Again, like some great jungle cat, he skinned back his lips, teeth parted, and like a killer cat, went for his enemy's throat.

Guy's thumbs gouged into his eyes, remained. The pain in his groin rolled through his body, that in his eyes down his spine. His own powerful hands circled that neck. Then, as he and Guy rolled, his jaws parted and his teeth got purchase, not on the windpipe, but on the nose and came together. He held on, teeth biting his enemy's nose, thumbs crashing the neck, his own groin and eyes shooting agony through all of him. Locked thus in mortal strife, they rolled, bumping into the feet of their circled, watching fellows.

Blood thundered in Royal; the salt of Guy's evil blood was on his tongue, going down his throat. His eyes were pushed to the back of his skull. There was only death in the cave—death for him or for the other.

Then, even through pounding, bloody struggle, Royal recalled why they were here. Not to fight, not to kill each other—but to band together and flee. Guy was one of his lieutenants. Guy was on an equal footing with Ebon.

He unclamped his teeth from Guy's nose, took his hands off that throat, wrenched loose and scrambled up. Guy staggered to his feet and started for Royal. The other bucks threw themselves upon him and held him, though he lunged and cursed, blood streaming from his mangled nose.

"You can't let him go, Royal" Princess cried softly. "It isn't safe to let him live . . . he'll cost us all our freedom!"

"If I killed him now," Royal told her, his breath surging in and out, "I'd be no bettah than the mastah or any othah ruthless white man."

"He'll do anything to hurt us!" Princess insisted. "Please, Royal"

"He can't do much harm in the time remaining," Royal said. "We'll gag him, chain him, and take him to the pen."

Already Ebon and the others were holding Guy and stuffing a rag into his mouth. They tied his wrists behind his back with a strap from Royal's saddlebags.

"You make any noise walkin' back to the pen," Ebon threatened, "an' you git my knife in youah back. No mat-tah what happens, you git my knife fu'st . . . even if the mastah gits me the nex' minutel"

Royal hoisted the saddlebags, which held only a fraction of the gold, the emptied spaces being now packed with shot. The other bucks were hanging their bags of gold and shot around their necks, and Princess was arranging two small bags of shot in the same manner on her person.

"The militia's called in strong," one buck said.

"Yas," Ebon agreed. "The white men's afraid of the blacks 'cause the slaves outnumbah 'em. That's why theah laws give them complete control of the black man—so they kin perfect theahse'fs f'um him. That's why a slave hasn't got no rights, no moah than a ho'se or a dog, why a black man can't be free in the South."

As they all spoke together, Royal and Ebon were tying bundles of rifles on each other's backs. The other bucks were doing the same. Even Guy was laden with two heavy bags of shot.

"Each one of you," Royal instructed them, "divide the gold among the slaves that go with us. We bettah start now."

Though it seemed to Royal that they had spent too

much time in the cave, he realized that in reality it had been only a short while. Aside from the brief fight with Guy, they had been working steadily, getting rifles and shot and gold loaded.

Royal drew Princess aside. "Leave the shot in the swamp behind Ebon's pen," he said. "Then go back to the house and hide in the attic."

"I want to stay with you," she protested.

"You hold my seed in youah body," he said. "You have to protect that seed. If the uprising succeeds, meet me at the pens. If it fails, use the plan in which the mistress takes you to Boston. If I don't meet you there, go back to Africa . . . with my seed."

She lingered only to press his hands. Then she left the cave, and after her Ebon left with Guy in his charge, and after them the others.

They moved toward the plantation house, walking well apart, even Princess walking alone, so that no two would risk being caught together. As Royal walked night swamp, his fellows unseen and unheard, he reproached himself for building the slaves' hopes.

Many of them might die—at the white man's hand, or later, during tortuous flight. And suppose the slaves must kill white men or themselves be killed? Suddenly, even though Royal had killed white men—first to save his own life, later to help Mercy and her daughters—a sickness at the prospect of killing still other whites swept him.

Still, at this moment, he and Princess could steal away together. The two of them would have a far better chance now and alone than later, with over two hundred other fleeing slaves, many of them children.

But he was committed. Even now, Princess must be near the house. All over Hunnicutt Hill, in the pens were locked slaves who trusted him, who believed he would lead them to freedom, who waited.

Come, he said mentally to his fellows who were stealing with him through the swamp, walk with care my brothers, for now it begins.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The sharp, unexpected sound of a rattler lifted to his right. Instinctively he leapt sidewise to avoid that particular lurking swamp death and kept on toward the pens.

There they were—the pens—the slave quarters. They lay quiet, no movement anywhere, no sign of the trusties, who had promised to stay out of sight. The two small bags of shot were where Princess had left them. Royal's companions came out of the swamp and stood with him in the growth just beyond Ebon's pen.

Royal seemed to sense the presence of whites, of danger, then discounted it. Undoubtedly the feeling was caused by his knowledge that the whites were searching for arms and would return. Or had they already returned? Were they at this moment in the plantation house, at the table?

"Put youah loads of rifles an' shot an' gol' down," he whispered, unloading his own as he spoke. "An' wait heah."

He went stealing to that same window hole.

Silas whispered, "Who that?"

"It's us," Royal whispered. "Has the posse come back?"

"No . . . ain' bin no comin' or goin'. 'Cept the trusties . . . they somewheah in the stable."

"We'll be right back," Royal told him, "with rifles. Youah to lead, Silas. Be ready. The signal foah breaking out will be a cock crowing three times."

He hurried to the others and whispered instructions, after which three of them dispersed to pass rifles, shot and gold through the barred back window holes. Then, with Ebon prodding Guy along, Royal unlocked the door of the pen and Ebon shoved the big fighter inside.

"Le's spancel him," Ebon urged.

"No," Royal decided. "Untie and ungag him."

"Does ah git a rifle?" demanded Guy the instant his mouth was free.

"No," Royal replied. "All you get is the chance to go with the rest of us, and youah fair share of the gold. If you give any trouble, the bucks in this pen are to gag you and spancel you to youah shelf so you can't move and you'll be left behind."

Royal passed arms, ammunition and gold, then went outside, Ebon behind him, and locked the pen. Two of the other helpers had returned and were now locked in so that only Ebon and one other buck were missing from the roster.

"Why don' we make ouah break right now?" Ebon asked. "We got rifles, an' we got the gold."

"The moment the white men return," Royal reminded him, "they'll find us gone and start aftah us. Our best chance is to wait until theah in the house, and surprise them."

"I s'pose," said Ebon. "Mebbe we unlock the pens now?"

Almost, Royal agreed, then reconsidered. "The mastah may try the door when the posse comes back," he said. "If he finds them locked, he won't enter and find the rifles, and he won't bring on fire from the slaves."

"It makes sense," Ebon said. "Youah a smaht boy, Royal."

"I want the whites in the house, eating a meal," Royal said. "If you and I and the trusties go in with rifles, we'll surprise them and take them without firing. Ouah uprising will be accomplished without a shot to alert the countryside. We'll lock the whites in the jail, then we'll unlock the pens, where the slaves already have the dissentahs spanceled, and we'll all run at that time."

They were silent. "We'll all three go to the stable," Royal said, "and make suah the trusties are ready."

Cat and Bone were waiting, eager to get things under-

way. Again Royal had to explain his plan and justify the need for waiting until the posse returned.

"We'll have four watches," he finished. "Cat, you take the South side of the area; Bone, the West side; Ebon, the North side. And you," he touched the other helper on the arm, "take the East. The first one of you to heah the posse returning, give one cock crow. Then you Cat and Bone act as you always do with the mastah. We'll wait until the men go into the house."

"What if the mastah unlocks my pen?" asked Ebon. "What if he finds the rifles . . . and misses me and this buck . . . s'pose him and the othah white men comes at us shootin'?"

"That won't happen," Royal replied. "We outnumber them, and we'll be waiting. The advantage of surprise is on ouah side."

He felt his scalp crawl even as he spoke but attributed it to the tenseness of the situation. "They won't come in with theah rifles aimed," he went on, "but even if they do, we'll be ready. We'll unlock the pens and five black men will set onto one white man, bind him and drag him to the jail. We still won't have to shoot, won't have to make noise."

They stood in silence.

Then Royal said, "Get to youah posts. I'll scout to see which paths to take as we leave."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

He stood in shadow as his lookouts disposed themselves. His heart was drumming; the uprising was now underway. The trap was set for the white men to walk into.

He stole away, rifle ready. Down the swamp road toward Lida's cottage he sped, ever quiet, ever watchful. Past the cottage he went and into the swamp he traveled.

To the south lay a wicked section of swamp, snake infested and fever-ridden. He pressed on until he reached this and stood within its edge, absorbing its advantages and its dangers. It seemed, as he gazed out over it in starshine, to stretch for endless miles.

Standing thus, he accepted, with dull heaviness, the fact that this was at once both the safest and most dangerous way for his fleeing people. It was safe because the posse and the bounty hunters and the militia could assume that Royal was by now dead if he had hidden here six days ago. It was safe because of its immense size, because no one outside it could see small bands of black men, black women and black children toiling through its black reaches in the blackness of night. Safe because at its far side the slaves could filter at night by pairs and families and singly in every possible direction, veering as soon as they dared, to the blessed road North.

It was dangerous because there were sinkholes and bogs and quicksands to suck them down and consume them. Dangerous for there was every kind of deadly snake crawling the mud or lying coiled and waiting to strike any black foot that came within reach. Dangerous, for there was little food. Dangerous, for the swamp was

man's natural enemy. The going through it was almost impossible, even for the strongest man, and tonight there would be women and children as well. Each man must carry a child, and each woman must go on her own, live or die.

Moving up and down the border of this swamp, Royal decided on what appeared to be the least hazardous of all the hazardous ways across. He would hold the fleeing blacks within the edge and then he would send them in small groups moments apart, keep them filtering through in a more or less direct route, then have them spread and leave the swamp along a long line on the other side.

This decided, he moved back through the part of the swamp which was so familiar to him, ran noiselessly along the road past Lida's cottage, ever on the alert.

All was quiet as he stole back to the quarters. He made the rounds, checking on the lookouts, who were all in place. They had seen nothing, heard nothing.

He stood with Ebon and listened. The quiet hurt his ears, beat in them, becoming noisy from its very quietness. His body prickled with uneasiness; it was only suspense, he thought, only the waiting. The white men would come openly when they came; they would not steal upon the plantation.

"I'll be at the pens," he whispered, and went to the first pen.

He would unlock it and all the others the instant the cock-crow signal sounded.

He had reached the back of the stud pen to hide when suddenly, from out of the trees, from every innocent shadow, from behind stable and stud pens and sheds, sprang white men. White men were everywhere and Royal and his helpers were but five black men against at least thirty whites.

Royal's ears were beating. Hunnicutt had brought reinforcements . . . he had consolidated three posses. Now Royal knew that the white men did indeed believe an uprising was afoot. They had done some plotting of their own and their plot was in action. This was why

Royal had sensed danger. His native Mandingo instinct, his jungle self, had warned him something was wrong. The white men had searched for weapons; failing to find them, they assumed the guns were in the hands of the slaves and now they were themselves attacking.

This all flashed through Royal's mind in an instant.

"We see you sentries!" roared Hunnicutt's voice. "Drop them guns an' surrendahl!"

A rifle shot cracked out from the sentry nearest the master. Instantly some of the white men fired and there was the sound of the sentry's body falling. Right after the thud, Hunnicutt shouted again. "Weah heah to slaughtah ev'ry one of you that's in on this insurrection . . . surrendah or be slaughtahed!"

Two more of the sentries' rifles cracked. Again the whites fired and this time Royal saw both sentries break into a run, heard more shots, saw them plunge into blackness, hitting the ground heavily. That leaves only Ebon, he thought, only Ebon and me.

"Surrendahl" howled the master. "Surrendah or die!"

Not a shot came from the pens, not a sound. Well, Royal thought, do you expect rats in a trap to fight? Do you expect slaves, though armed, to shoot when they are locked in pens and the white man can cut them down?

Guilt took him. He had armed his people but they were not daring and they had never fought. They had always been enslaved; it wasn't in them to attack the white man from behind locked doors.

Rifle strap across his shoulder, he dropped to his belly and lay in the black shadow of the pen. Now he moved his powerful muscles and on his belly slithered toward the locked door of the pen, which was farthest from the white men. Rising to his knees, he unlocked the door, pushed it open.

Belly-down again, he slithered to the next pen and unlocked that door and pushed it open. But the slaves cowered within, too frightened to come out and face the master.

"The pens!" Royal heard Hunnicutt shout. "Theah open! Come on . . . le's rush 'em!"

Even as he heard the running feet of the white men, Royal moved fast, still on his belly, wriggling away into the blackness. In the fringe of swamp growth, he lay waiting and watching.

The whites sent a few of their number storming into the two open pens. Royal could see the glint of lantern light, could hear the angry, excited voices. In a few moments he saw them appear between the pens, carrying a lantern and bundles of the rifles, which they had taken from the slaves. In the dancing lantern light he watched them pile the rifles between the pens and go on to search the other pens, leaving two of their company to guard the fire-arms. He waited until men had entered another pen. Then, rifle strap still across his shoulder, he again slithered belly-down to the back of Ebon's pen.

He would somehow do something. The instant would come in which he could swing the tide.

"Mastah!" he heard Guy roar inside the pen. "Mastah . . . dis's Guy! He wan's to tawk to Mastah Leel!"

"Shut up, niggah!" called a white man.

"Guy got infohmation foh de mastah!" bellowed the fighter.

Princess had been right, Royal thought. He should not have let Guy live. This one slave would bring great wrath upon the others, sure death to some. He might even cost Princess her life and Royal's tribe a future emperor.

Now came the sound of running and the master's voice. "What the hell now? What's goin' on now?"

"Mastah Leel" shouted Guy. "Dis's Guy, wantin' to tell de mastah evathing! It 'us dat Royal plotted dis, Mastah! Guy fought him, Mastah Lee, in de swamp, an' almos' kilt him but he got away! An' Ebon an' de othahs wuh-kin' with him to kill de mastah an' all de white fo'ks. 'Dey fo'ced Guy into dis pen . . . it tu'ck ten of 'em mastah, Guy 'us fightin' so . . . an' de mastah was gone, an' Guy couldn' wahn him!"

"When was this fight?" Hunnicutt yelled.

"I nigh, Mastah!" Guy shouted back. "Dey kep' Guy gagged so's he couldn' yell! But Guy wasn' nevah no paht of de plot, Mastah . . . Guy bin fightin' de othah niggahs . . . 'specially dat Royal . . . evah sence he foun' out 'bout de plot! Guy loyal to de Mastah, an' dat's a fac'! An' de truf!"

"Come heah . . . gathah 'roun'!" Hunnicutt yelled.

Royal noticed, even in his rage at Guy, that the master had completely missed one fact. Guy had not explained how he happened to be out of the lock stud pen.

Hunnicutt's rage was uncontrollable. The way his voice shook as he recounted to his posse what Guy had shouted, for all the world as though they hadn't heard it too, betrayed his rage.

The blades were also very angry. The older men, though deeply angry, their voices tight and somewhat loud, were more thoughtful.

"All ouah lives," cried one blade, "have bin at stake heah tonight!"

"Yes!" cried another blade. "We all bin endangahed by these black beasts! We got to teach 'em a lesson foah all blacks foah all time!"

"Jus' let me git my han's on Royall!" shouted Hunnicutt. "I'll make an example of him that nobody . . . black or white . . . will evah foahgit! An' I'll fuhthah execute ev'ry slave that's had a paht, howevah small, in this insurrection!"

"Now Lee," said an older voice, "youah goin' to lose a great deal of money if you execute that buck Royal alone. But if youah goin' to execute othah slaves indiscriminately, you may ruin youah own economy. Keep this in view, son."

"I'll beah an equal share of what Mistah Hunnicutt may lose in black flesh!" cried one of the blades. "If the rest of you'll join me, it won' cost any of us a great deal!"

"That's right, Mistah Hunnicutt, suh!" cried a second blade. "Don' it make sense, Mistah Vannice, suh? It behooves us all to stamp out insurrection heah an' now!"

Another white spoke up, not so old a voice as Van-nice's, not young enough to be a blade. "Not on'y must Royal, the ringleadah die," said the voice, "but enough othahs to teach ev'ry nigra in Louisiana a lesson none will evah foahgit."

A murmur of assent arose. Royal felt like someone had ground him into the earth. He had led his fellow slaves into this. If even he'd left the pens unlocked, the blacks might have come out shooting, might at this moment be running free. Instead, they were trapped, and because of him.

Unless—wild hope—he and Ebon, wherever he now was, the only slaves at large, could change things. If Royal could get the ear of Silas in this pen and avoid being noticed by Guy, he might still incite the slaves to action.

Then, if he could again unlock this pen, he could lead them against the whites. They could seize the stacked rifles and open fire before too many of them were shot.

If he could accomplish this, the slaves would still have a chance. They might gain the will to fight, for they would be fighting for their lives. And they could win, for those in the pen at least numbered the same as the whites. While they were engaging the white men, Royal would be unlocking other pens and from them would pour the black, fighting tide.

Cautiously he rose to his feet, keeping to one side of the window hole. Inside Guy was again bellowing, calling upon the master to believe him.

Now came a whisper. "Silas heah . . . Royal?"

"Yes," Royal whispered, taking advantage of Guy's continued roaring. "I'm going to unlock the doah," he said. "I've got a rifle . . . I'll covah the white men. Get the bucks to rush out, grab rifles and shoot. Tell them I said it's an ordah . . . an ordah to save theah lives."

"I'll do it!" Silas agreed.

Royal went into his belly-crawl along the side of the pen to the front. Faintly, he got the sound of another one

crawling and knew that Ebon was behind him, that he must have been hiding in the fringe of swamp.

He inched around the front of the pen. Ahead, to the far side, he could see the feet and legs of the white men as they continued excitedly to discuss what they would do about executing slaves.

Here was the door. He pulled to his knees, put the key into the lock, pushed. He sprang to his feet, rifle ready, Ebon ready.

The slaves were a black clot in the doorway. They made no move to come out but their very presence alerted the white men. As the first white rifle cracked, Ebon fired. As the white men laid down a barrage, Royal aimed and pulled trigger. Another barrage and Ebon plunged to the ground; shot was cutting down the slaves in the doorway.

Still another barrage. Rifle empty, Royal fell as if hit. He slithered back along the pen and from there into the swamp's edge, where he lay flat, breathing fast, mind going.

Desperately he cast about for some way to help the slaves, even now. The path was clear for him to run but he could not. There were the others and there was Princess.

"Pull them wounded nigras out of that pen!" he heard Hunnicutt shout. "Throw 'em out on the groun' . . . well apaht, so's I kin finish 'em off!"

Royal lay unflinching and counted the rifle shots. Up to seven he counted, then the shots ceased. Seven black men dead, three black sentries dead. Ten in all and more to come.

"Lock that pen!" Hunnicutt shouted. "Station a man at evah pen to watch foah that Royal buck! He'll try ag'in . . . we'll be ready foah him!"

Royal strained to see and hear, ready to vanish into the swamp if they started toward him. "Bring that Ebon!" Hunnicutt yelled. "Why didn' you tell me he 'us still alive? I aim to make a 'zample of him . . . drag him ovah heah into the lantahn light!"

As activity centered between pens, Royal again belly-crept to the back of the pen. He had reloaded his rifle and carried it by the strap across his shoulder.

There might still be a way to free his people. Or maybe he could at least save Ebon.

Stretched flat, he peered around the corner of the building. Between it and the next pen, near where the rifles were stacked, the flickering of half a dozen lanterns showed the forms and lit the faces of the gathered, angry white men.

Hunnicutt was standing a pace apart with a wicked, long-bladed knife in hand. Two blades were dragging an inert figure, which they dropped at Hunnicutt's feet. The light from a lantern shone on the face, showing it to be Ebon.

Ebon moaned. There was a glint of blood at his neck and on his chest.

"You see this black?" Hunnicutt cried to his friends. "Guy tells us he 'us the fust lieutenant of this insurrection! He's a tough one . . . he ain' dead, though he's been shot by white gent'men's bullets! I'm goin' to make a 'zample of him! I'm goin' to show the othah slaves that are listenin' an' them that kin see out of the windas, what happens to a nigra that rises up ag'in his mastahl!"

Now Hunnicutt bent over, grasped Ebon's clothes in his left hand and swiftly slit them from top to bottom with the knife in his right hand. Royal watched, breath gone, fists clutched, knuckles digging the ground.

Quickly Hunnicutt scooped up Ebon's testicles, severed them, and tossed them into the darkness. Within seconds, he had severed the penis and tossed it away.

Ebon gave one great, moaning cry as the penis came loose. He rolled his head once, his eyes glinted in the light, then went vacant and staring. His mouth hung open; there was no more shuddering breath. There was only the blood—at the neck, the chest, the privates, where his body lay in a puddle of its own blood.

"See!" roared the master. "Ebon's dead, an' it's Royal you kin blame! Royal is the authah of this cahnage, you

all heah it! I know that Royal is heah, somewheah neah, hidin' an' spyin' an' listenin'! I say it an' I shout it . . . we white gent'men'll hunt him down! He will be ouah screamin', dyin', sufferin' testimonial that we Southern gent'men will not . . . I repeat . . . that we will *not* submit or tolerate a nigra slave plottin' ag'in us, killin' us, spoilin' ouah wives an' daughtahs an' sistahs! The name of Royal, the Mandingo bastahd, will nevah be foahgot by white man or black nigra slave aftah I, his mastah, am through with him! Now to begin, foah his benefit an' because I know he is lurkin' within soun' of my voice, I am goin' to deprive him of somethin' he re'lly wants unless he shows himse'f!"

Hunnicutt paused. An aching, waiting silence filled the night. Slowly, behind the pen, Royal came to his knees, rifle in hand.

"Gent'men," Hunnicutt resumed, still shouting, "I am goin' to have Princess—that's Royal's wench—brought heah! I am goin' to puhsonally slice huh teats off like slices off a loaf of bread, an' then I am goin' to ram a rifle up huh privates an' fiah it! This I am goin' to do unless Royal shows himse'f!"

Maddened, Royal sprang into the open. Instantly shot sprayed, burning past his head, crashing into the wood of the pen.

"Hol' fiah . . . hol' fiah!" Hunnicutt screamed.

Even as the master screamed his order, Royal lifted his rifle and took aim at the hated white man. But as he pressed trigger, two blades tackled Hunnicutt, and all three crashed to the ground and Royal's shot went into another white man, dropping him.

Royal wheeled. He plunged into darkness, swamp-bound, a hunted animal. From behind came the sound of immediate pursuit.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

He grabbed up his saddlebags without breaking stride and raced deeper into swamp. His mind functioned on only one level—lead the master away from Princess, decoy him, save her by leading all the white men far from Hunnicutt Hill. As he ran he listened for Hunnicutt's voice amongst those pursuing but did not hear it.

There was only an occasional shout, "This way!" There was an occasional curse. Aside from that, there was only the sound of their feet, their relentless, pursuing feet.

He could not prevent the master or others from turning back to the house. But the longer he could lead them, the longer he could stay just far enough ahead to keep them following, the more their rage would center on him and their intentions toward Princess cool.

Meanwhile, the mistress would help. Certainly she would have been listening, would have heard the master's shout. She would hide Princess; she would take a pistol into her own hands.

He veered, changing course. He ran carefully, slow enough that his pursuers could hear, fast enough that they could not overtake him. Now he ran along the edge of the swamp, making for the horse pasture and when he reached the pasture, he ran openly across open ground, making sure the white men could see him.

Under one of the widespreading oak trees, he singled out a horse, flung one leg over its back and was mounted. Grasping the mane, he dug his heels into the flanks and sent it loping across the pasture land.

Now the white men would have to mount their horses, wherever they had left them hidden, and he could lead

them miles away from Princess. At the edge of the pasture he pulled up.

The white men had disappeared. Royal sat, listening to the thud of his heart, feeling the rise and fall of the horse's breathing between his big knees. He felt they would go for their mounts, would thunder back this way, but he couldn't be sure. This was an almost unbearable time of waiting, of suspense, of wondering which way they were headed—for Princess or for himself.

When he heard their horses' hooves, sweat jumped out on him and ran in rivulets. When they came into sight but had not yet seen him, he kicked his horse into a gallop, cutting across pasture and field. He deliberately kept out of sight but made certain the sound of his horse would give them something to follow.

He raced down a side road for a mile, cut across a field, took another road, cut across pasture land. In this manner he sought to evade any horsemen scattered about the countryside who might or might not be patrolers. And all the while he kept moving indirectly toward New Orleans. Ever behind him hung the sound of his pursuers.

As he galloped into the outskirts of the city, he gradually began to pull up. When the houses were close together on the street, he dismounted. He turned the horse back in the direction from which they had come and slapped him on the rump. As the animal went loping away, Royal turned the first corner he came to and headed for the waterfront, saddlebags around his neck, rifle in hand.

He was now in a position to keep the master and the others away from Princess. Knowing that Royal was in New Orleans, they would remain and search for him.

He heard the rattle of hooves. Instinctively he vaulted an iron fence enclosing a tall, dark house and crouched behind bushes. Here they came, trotting their horses, almost twenty-strong, every one of them intent upon the capture of the Hunnicutt Hill runner.

When they were past, Royal made for the waterfront.

He kept to the darkest streets, watched for carriages and pedestrians, stepping behind any tree to let them pass. The fewer who saw him now, the fewer would be able to identify him.

He dared not stay in New Orleans. He could remain only long enough to feel sure the master had given up his plan to mutilate Princess. In a matter of course, he'd have to leave the city, for the danger of being arrested was keen.

Considering where to go, he strode on. If he returned to Hunnicutt Hill, he would be mowed down. There had been thirty men in the master's posse; there had been fewer than twenty who passed on horseback. That meant the master had left behind a guard of perhaps ten of his white friends.

So there remained Boston and the original plan to meet Princess there. Doggedly he traveled on toward the docks, ever watchful for the posse, police, militia, strongarms, anyone.

Eventually he climbed a big oak tree on a narrow street and hid in its branches. He knew his clothes were in such sad condition that he dared not be seen, even in the roughest section of the docks. He could only wait until morning and seek out a shop.

At dawn he slid down from the oak. This was the street of the cribs where cheap whores plied their trade for fifty cents a customer, the street where he had hidden under the protection of a white whore. He recalled a hole-in-the-wall shop where old clothes were sold and headed for it, passing crib after crib. The row of one-storied, single rooms was quiet, every door closed, every window blank. The whores were sleeping after the night's tricks.

He had to knock twice at the door of the shop before it opened a crack. A white-haired, sallow-faced man with thick eyebrows peered out. "What ye want?" he demanded. "I ain't open!" Then his watery eyes came to the saddlebags and after that to the rifle and he looked frightened.

"I ain't going to hurt you, suh," Royal said. "I've got gold and I'm willing to pay for strong, clean clothes."

"Ye'd draw attention in them rags," the old man said. "We-ll, come in."

After searching, they found a pair of trousers almost big enough for Royal, though somewhat too short in the legs, and a shirt large enough that he could button it part way. Shoes were a different matter but after industrious search a pair was found that Royal could get onto his great feet and move about in with some degree of comfort.

He unhesitatingly paid the old man the price he demanded. Then he added ten dollars to help him forget his hint that maybe he should call the police, a big nigger waking him up to buy clothes and toting gold and with a rifle, too.

Royal gave him the rifle, not so much to buy his silence as to get rid of the weapon which, from now on, would mark him. His remaining gold he stowed in his pockets, along with his worn, water-marked freedom paper, trying to keep the old fellow from seeing but failing. Then he presented him with the saddlebags and the shot.

Even as he left the store, Royal knew the old shopkeeper would be out asking questions the moment the town came awake. In a short time he'd learn there was a big reward offered for Royal's capture and would join the pack. He'd very likely go to the police and tell about the big nigger with the gold and the rifle and shot.

Walking openly, alert for Hunnicutt and his friends, Royal made his way along the docks. He felt much better in the whole, clean clothes and knew he was less noticeable than he had been in his rags.

He spied a big Negro moving kegs down at the edge of the dock and went to him. The Negro was broad and muscular, and had a surly-friendly face.

He nodded curtly at Royal. "Lookin' foh wuhk?" he asked.

"No," Royal said. "I'm trying to find out how to buy passage to Boston. I've got a freedom paper and gold."

"Dat a good way to git tricked."

"How do you mean?"

"You pay a white man gol' foh passage," the Negro explained, "an' he takes de gol' an' makes you think he goin' he'p you. Den he goes to some othah white man dat wan's to buy hisse'f a slave cheap an' he sell you to dat man an' you fin' you ain' bin nothin' but a slave de whole time. It's happen' moah dan once."

"Theah must be some way I can buy passage north," Royal said.

"I kin git you smuggled onto a ship foh Boston," the dock hand offered. "Foh enough gol'. I got a frien' w'uks on de docks dat kin he'p. But we got to git lots of gol' if we do it, 'cause it danger'us an' we run a risk of gittin' de white men aftah us. We don' dare to jus' he'p black men run, undahstan' . . . we got ouah own se'fs to look out foh."

"How much gold do you want?" Royal asked.

"All you got. Empty yoh pockits befoah us . . . an' we'll see if you got enough to make it wu' th the risk."

"I've got a thousand dollahs gold," Royal replied. "Is that enough?"

The dockman frowned but Royal could see he was impressed. Finally he nodded. "It bettah be dat much when you counts it out," he warned. "You set down 'tween dem rows of cotton bales so's you won' be easy seen an' I'll fetch my frien'."

Because there was no other escape open, Royal followed the Negro's instructions. He sat leaning against a cotton bale, staring up and down the aisle formed by bales, and waited, ready to run.

Within moments he heard the Negro speaking to someone else, the voices growing stronger, and knew this was a signal that all was well. The two appeared in the aisle. The second Negro was bigger and blacker than the first, though neither approached Royal's tremendous size.

"Les' see youah gol'," demanded the first one.

"Aftah I know the plan," Royal said.

"We got a big box couple steps away," said the second Negro. "It foh packin' goods but it empty. It got holes in de lid that'll let air in. We nail you in de box so's you kin push de lid off when you git to Boston, an' ship you dat way."

"We's stevedoahs," the first worker explained, "an' we'll tote you onto de ship an' bring grub an' watah latah on dat you keep in de box foah de voyage. Nobody know you on de ship but us an' you . . . how dat soun'?"

"When would I be taken aboard?" Royal asked.

"Right aftah you pay us de gol', an' we see it a thousan' dollahs," said the second stevedore. "We take you right to de box an' tote you de nex' minnit. An' bring de grub latah . . . dat in-cluded in youah price."

Royal began to empty his pockets. He counted out the gold in neat piles so that the two could comprehend the amount more readily. When he had finished, each stowed his share in his clothing.

"C'mon," said the first one, "le's gol'"

Thus within moments Royal found himself in the packing box. He lay on his back and pulled his knees up because he was longer than the box. He felt the vibrations as the stevedores nailed on the lid, felt the box lifted and felt it carried. When it was set down, he felt the movement of the ship under him as it rocked gently at the wharf.

All was silence immediately around him, though there was noise of lading elsewhere, and the sound of voices from ashore. He knew the stevedores had gone. And wondered if they would be able to bring him food and water soon enough, or if the ship would sail before they could manage it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Lee Hunnicutt had remained grimly silent throughout the chase to New Orleans. Now, in his room at the St. Louis Hotel, he wanted only to see Royal die.

Princess, he decided, he would not harm. Frances could keep her as personal maid. He would have the wench bred ceaselessly, would see to it that she dropped a sucker every year without fail.

He began to pace the room restlessly. Thinking of having Princess bred, desire rose in him. Keyed up as he was, he wanted a woman. This was heightened by his secret humiliation over spilling his sap in his clothes when he executed the buck and the wench, Pansy. As a result he was half-crazy with need.

The more he paced the more tortuous his urge became. Suddenly he was weary of searching for Royal; he wanted only to relieve himself with a woman. But that he would not do until he had thrown out the final net, from which the slave could not escape. Only then would he permit himself to revel in passion. And after the revel, he would join the others and run down his quarry.

At dawn he was on the waterfront seeking strongarms who might be trying for a day's work, men who were mighty and without scruple and greedy for money. Men who would jump at fifty dollars each for cornering a Negro in preference to working all day carrying bales of cotton.

Within an hour he had six such thugs in his employ—rough, tough, uncaring and exceptionally greedy, for he had to pay them sixty dollars each on the spot.

"Now min'," he stressed to them, "I don' wan' the police or the militia in on this. Theah is a rewahd on this

black, an' if you ketch him, I'll divide the rewahd among the six of you, plus a bonus foah each aftah you delivah the slave puhsonally to me. You kin fin' me at the St. Louis Hotel. If I ain' theah, then leave wohd foah me."

Returning to the hotel, he joined his friends, who were in the dining room at breakfast. "Gent'men," he told them, "I have bin out organizin' a search foah my runnah. Evahthin's undah control, so theah ain' no need foah me to impose on you futhuh."

"You suah, Lee?" asked Vannice.

"I've hiahed men," Hunnicutt replied. "It's past time you gent'men retuhned to youah own plantations to see how conditions are."

"Mebbe you should do the same, Lee," said Arthur Stone, "you havin' no ovahseeah."

"Tomorrah," Hunnicutt promised. "Theah's a good chance these strongahms'll run Royal down within twenty-foah houahs."

"Tell you what, Lee," offered Luther Larkin, "theah's Lestah an' myse'f to run Black Thorn . . . an' we got an ovahseeah besides. I'll go to Hunnicutt Hill an' let the rest of the posse go to theah plantations. I'll look aftah things 'til you git back."

"I thank you kindly, Luthah," Hunnicutt said. "I accep' an' will be indebted to you, as to all you fine gent'men."

Consequently, their procedure thus being determined, they all left after breakfast. When they were gone, Hunnicutt had a few words with one of the boys working at the hotel and went up to his room.

An hour later he was pacing nervously, beside himself with desire. When a tap sounded at his door he yanked it open.

A shapely, tall woman of thirty stood smiling at him. Her hair was very blonde, pulled to a high knot, leaving a wealth of curls tumbling down in front of her ears. Her face was oval and dimpled, her curved lips painted red, her figure full and exciting in green silk that matched her eyes. Even in his impatience, Hunnicutt noted that her

skirt stood out full under starched petticoats and that her basque jacket was nipped around a tiny waist.

"What the hell took so long?" he demanded.

"You going to ask me in?" she retorted, losing neither smile nor dimples. "Are you real sure I'm who you think I am?"

"Hell," he said roughly, not caring whether she was whore or lady, "I tol' the boy downstairs to bring me a woman. If youah the woman, come in . . . if you ain' the woman, go wheahevah it is youah headed foah."

She laughed and stepped inside. "My price is a hundred dollars," she said as he locked the door. "I have standards, and I keep to them. When a—" she paused ever so slightly, then continued—"gentleman requests my company, I take the time to make myself beautiful for him, or I don't go! After all, he's paying— isn't he?"

She stood before him and turned, displaying her dress, her figure, her grace. Some sweet perfume came from her. Her green eyes twinkled as she looked back over her shoulder at him.

His sex humped and burned. "Take it off!" he ordered hoarsely. "I don' wan' to waste any moah time!"

She made a small curtsy. "You know," she said, unbuttoning her basque jacket, "I like a man who wants to get right to business! That's the only man who can give me a good time! You have no idea what it means to a girl in my business to find such a man!"

Hunnicuttt grunted, ripping off his own garments, eyes on her emerging figure. They tossed aside their undergarments and looked at each other.

Her breasts were big and bouncing, with upstanding red nipples. Her waist was tiny, her hips swelling with a hint of the same bounce of the breasts and her thighs were from the gods. Her mound was as blonde as her hair and the curls there as profuse and soft as those at her face.

She turned, raced to the bed, flung herself upon her back and held out her arms. "Come and get me!" she cried.

Hunnicuttt lunged to her, bestrode her, positioned himself between the outflung, smooth thighs. He thrust his burning manhood at the blonded mound but as it touched her wonderful, moist entrance, he felt his manhood weaken and droop, though the burning desire rose, lifted, flamed.

"Do somethin', damn you . . . do somethin'!" he growled. "What kin' of whore are you . . . do somethin'!"

"I'm one like you never had before!" she cried.

"Then show me," he groaned. "Git on with youah wu'kl"

He felt her fingers close around his semi-tumescent organ. They were warm and firm and they pressed him tenderly, then tighter, loosened, pressed again, loosened. And with the motion she moaned softly, a small gurgle rising from within her throat, the wonderful, titillating motion going on . . . and on.

"Now!" she gasped when he was distended and all but shooting his sap into her hand, baptizing her fingers. "Now . . . oh . . . now . . . !"

Again he plunged, again weakened and drooped. He fell with his body flat on her, his cheek against her cheek.

"What the hell kin' of whoah are you?" he demanded.

"You already asked me that," she retorted. "I'm an unusual whore . . . I'm the best to be found . . . don't you dare try to pretend I don't know my business!"

Crazed, the touch and feel and warmth of her body a torture, the need and burning of his own body a damnation, he lay on her and swore and wept and called her every foul name he could lay tongue to. Suddenly she wriggled from under him.

"Roll onto your back," she said. "I know what you need . . . what any man needs at a time like this."

He lay flat, the semi-tumescence a crucifixion. Blessedly her mouth came over him, encompassed, moved, fed. And the tumescence grew. Her tongue moved up and down the bottom of his organ, and it grew. Fast it

swelled and went taut, unbearably, excitingly, maddeningly taut at the tip, and then the tip exploded and there poured forth his aching, reaching need; poured and emptied him, for now, of the torture.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

At noon, shortly after the nameless whore had left him, one of the hotel boys brought word to Hunnicutt that there was a rough looking man downstairs claiming urgent business with Mr. Lee Hunnicutt. Accordingly, hopeful that it was one of his strongarms, Hunnicutt went to a side entrance where the fellow was said to be waiting.

"Mister Lee Hunnicutt?" asked the rat-faced individual just outside the door on the banquette.

Hunnicutt nodded. This skinny man in plain boatman's attire was not one of his hirelings.

"I'm Hank Bass . . . I work with boats," the man said. "I'm on the waterfront all the time and this mornin' I had contact with a stevedore."

"So?" Hunnicutt asked.

His voice revealed nothing but his pulse stepped up and excitement entered him because perhaps this unprepossessing man was going to give him word of Royal.

"I foun' out 'bout a runaway black," Bass said. "I got a notion he's the one yer offerin' the reward fer."

"How did you know where to find me?"

"Word's aroun' the docks that yer in Noo Orleans. An' that ye stay at this hotel."

"The stevedore you mention . . . how did you fin' him?"

"I seen a big Nigra stevedore payin' out gold fer a meal," Bass related. "Now gold is somethin' Nigra stevedores don't never have. So I just kep' after him 'til he told me where he got it."

"An' wheah did he git it?"

"Frum a big Nigra that wanted to buy passage to

Boston," Bass said. "A big Nigra that paid a thousand in gold to two black stevedores to smuggle him onto a ship in a packin' box. And I found out they was to take him some grub and water fer the trip."

"How did you get them to tell you all this?" Hunnicutt asked.

"I skeered him 'bout what the law'd do to two Nigras flashin' gold," Bass said proudly. "I skeered him into thinkin' it was better to tell me ever'thing and I'd promise not to tell on 'em . . . keep 'em out of trouble, so to speak. I skeered him spitless 'bout what the law'd do to 'em if it was found out they aided and abetted a runaway. Well, the end of it was he got so skeered he told ever'thing—whereat the Nigra was hid. I promised to take grub and water to him and save their hides and he was so skeered he lit out, sayin' I could do it, he 'us through with the runaway, and so would his pal be."

"What happened then?" asked Hunnicutt.

"I nosed around and located the packing box," Bass said. "I took off the lid and passed the grub and water in."

"How do you know it was my black?" pressed Hunnicutt.

"He's the biggest Nigra I ever seen," Bass replied. "He looks like he could break a man in two with one hand. He looked suspicious of me . . . I got some worried myself. But he took the grub and begun to eat. Which is what I aimed fer him to do."

Hunnicutt looked at Bass, not understanding.

Bass spread his hands. "Don't ye ketch on? I drugged ever'thing. By now that black's drugged an' dead asleep. If ye'll come now, I kin lead ye to yer Nigra before he kin run ag'in . . . that is, if I git that big reward all fer myself."

"Can you keep youah mouth shut if it is my runnah . . . an' if we do biz'ness?"

"Sure I kin."

"I don' wan' the law to know I'm apprehendin' my slave . . . if he proves to be my slave," Hunnicutt said.

"Also it'll be to youah advantage to keep law an' the strongahms I hiahed out of it, foah they might jus' get the idea they should have pahd of the rewahd."

"Yer right," Bass agreed. "I'll keep my mouth shut. And I'll take ye to the ship."

"If it's my runnah," Hunnicutt promised, "you git the entiah rewahd."

Twenty minutes later they approached the brig, *Boston Star*, tied among other ships along the wharf. Once there, Bass produced a paper which Hunnicutt showed to the burly seaman who blocked their way.

"Theah's bin a mistake," Hunnicutt told the seaman. "My box of books was supposed to be put on the *Anita*, downrivah to Hunnicutt Hill . . . not on the *Boston Stah*, bound foah Boston. I'm heah to right things an' I've brought Mistah Bass to see to the transfer."

"I dunno," quibbled the seaman. "I ain' sure . . ."

"I have no time to waste," Hunnicutt said, pressing a gold piece into the seaman's palm. "An' I'm suah youah busy, gittin' ready to sail."

The seaman glanced down at his twenty dollar gold piece. "I reckon it's all right," he said, glancing toward the official looking paper in Hunnicutt's hand. "Just don't make no more to-do than needed, sir, if you please."

He stepped aside and Bass led into the hold. Here, beyond some stacked bales and kegs he stopped at a long box. Pulling a hand-hook from his clothes, he rapidly pried loose the lid and moved it so that Hunnicutt could see inside the box.

Hunnicutt looked down at the great, sleeping Mandingo. His blood surged. His legs threatened to shake but he stiffened them.

"That's him," he murmured, "that's my nigra. Nail on the lid. Take this papah an' have the box transferred to the *Anita*. I'll meet you theah in an houah with youah rewahd."

While he was at the bank, he sent a messenger to notify the livery stable that Mister Lee Hunnicutt would call for his horse another day. He then returned to the

Anita, made sure the box had been safely transferred, bought his fare and boarded.

The boat started downriver, its sidewheels turning. Hunnicutt stood at the rail and watched the New Orleans shoreline disappear, watched the mansions and swamplands of The Delta slide past. A great contentment was in him.

The master of Hunnicutt Hill was on his way home. His drugged runaway slave was safe in a box. At last Royal was bound for execution!

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Hunnicutt landed at Hunnicutt Hill at four in the afternoon. He had the box with Royal in it carried to the spot between pens where last night's carnage had taken place, where eleven blacks and one white man had been killed.

Luther Larken came to meet him. "I had all the bodies of the blacks piled by the pig pen," he said. "Theah waitin' youah ohdahs foah burial or othah disposal."

"That's fine, Luthah," Hunnicutt said. "I got Royal in this box. He's bin drugged but he's commencin' to thump 'roun' in theah. Mebbe his cahcass'll be added to those at the pig pen when I've finished with him . . . if I don't think of a moah interestin' disposal."

He stood looking around the quarters, which were unnaturally quiet. "Wheah the blacks?"

"Locked in the pens," replied Larkin. "Undah ouah ovahseeah's care. When my twin brothah Lestah foun' evahthin' at Black Thorn quiet an' in ohdah, he sent ouah ovahseeah to he'p out heh. If you wan' him to stay a day or two 'til you git a new ovahseeah, youah welcome to his suhvices."

"I thank you kin'ly an' accep'," Hunnicutt said. "I got a couple prospective ovahseeahs to talk to . . . I should settle on one or the othah by tomorra at the latest. I could use youah man's suhvices this minute if you be so kin' as to git him to this spot."

"Gorel" called Larkin. "Kin you come heah?"

A broad-shouldered, red-cheeked man of forty came from behind one of the pens, a rifle slung by a strap on his shoulder. "Ye called me, Mister Larkin?"

"You know Hex Gore, don' you, Lee?" Larkin asked.

Hunnicutt nodded and the overseer half-bowed. "Howdo, Mister Hunnicutt. Kin I he'p ye, sir?"

"This box," Hunnicutt said. "It's nailed shut, an' I'd like foah you to take off the lid. My runaway stud's in theah. He's bin drugged foah easy handlin' but he's commencin' to come to an' will have to be watched, 'cause I've no intention of lettin' him escape ag'in. But befoah you pry off the lid an' we got him to deal with, I'd like foah you to git that big fightah Guy out of his pen. Have him he'p you chain the bucks Vic an' Donis an' Horace an' Bud an' Homah an' foah moah they pick out. Bring 'em heah an' line 'em up in front of me."

"You figuah it safe to bring any of the blacks out at this time?" Larkin asked, as Gore went to do Hunnicutt's bidding.

"They got to be brought out some time," Hunnicutt reasoned. "I figuah Guy could well have bin a paht of the insuhrection but even if he was, he did infohm. He'll be scaihed enough that he'll do like he ought to do at least foah now. The othahs I named is all admiahahs of his . . . they always looked up to him because of his fightin' ability. So that makes 'em safah than mebbe some of the othahs, an' I need some he'p in my punishmint of Royal."

"But you lettin' them pick out foah othah blacks," pressed Larkin. "What's youah thinkin' on that?"

"I figuah they'll be cahful who they pick," Hunnicutt said. "They bin ovahcome . . . they all bin moah or less stopped in an insuhrection. Theah goin' to be scaihed when they come out heah . . . theah goin' to be wonda-hin' what's goin' to happen to theah own hides. An' Mistah Gore's goin' to have a rifle on 'em, an' so are you an' me. What chance they got? Also, they goin' to be in chains."

Larkin nodded. Together they waited. They could hear bumps and thuds from the packing box.

Gore appeared, the retinue of chained slaves at rifle point. Only Guy walked free. He held the end of the chain, leading his fellows. When Guy, at Gore's direc-

tion, had lined the bucks in front of the master and had himself taken his place at one end of the line, Hunnicutt looked them over, individually and at length.

They were all large, well built and strong, though none of them approached the six-foot-seven Royal in size, not even Guy. To a buck, big as they were and strong, they had paled to shades of dirty black and black-gray. Some of their lips were all but dancing in their faces and one or two pair of knees were shaking.

"You don' know what the mastah is goin' to do to punish you, do you?" Hunnicutt asked. He looked at them so demandingly that they began to shake their heads and their fear visibly increased.

"I'm goin' to give you ten a chance to prove youah good slaves," Hunnicutt said. "Now that my trusties went bad, I'm goin' to select some new trusties . . . mebbe fum amongst you ten." He paused, his eyes going keenly from face to face, noting their reaction. It seemed to be one of stunned amazement, which slowly turned to quivering, supplicating hope.

"I b'lieve you almost undahstan'," he said, "I re'lly do! Now le's see kin you undahstan' a bit fuhthuh. I am awah that I'll nevah git the truth 'bout which ones took paht in the insuhrection, 'cause you ain' but slaves—jus' a cut above a ho'se or a dawg—an' you scaihed I'm goin' to punish you. But I b'lieve youah scaihed enough to be good slaves now—aftah you watch what I'm goin' to do with Royal—aftah you see how he is goin' to be executed foah all the wicked things he done at Hunnicutt Hill. The las' an' wu'st was organizin' the insuhrection an' the shootin' an' killin' Mistah Wilbur Smith of Hawthorne, a fine white gent'man that nevah hahmed a soul in his life, no moah than I evah did! I got Royal in this box an' I 'spect you to he'p me execute him. Are you ready . . . are you eagah an' anxious to he'p me, youah mastah, with this necessary choah . . . an' all choahs in the futuah?"

The heads nodded more quickly this time, harder. Hunnicutt glanced inquiringly at Guy. "You had sense

enough to repoht the truth to me," he said. "You got sense enough to know is these slaves tellin' the truth now?"

"Guy got sense," mouthed the fighter. "Dey be good . . . Guy make 'em be good!"

"I'm goin' to try you out," Hunnicutt told the ten blacks. "Today is youah fust test. Theah'll be othahs. In that mannah I'll determine if any of you is fit to be trusties, if youah fit to stay on this plantation, if youah fit to go on livin' . . . or if you got to be executed similah to the way Royal is goin' to be executed heah an' now."

"Dey be good, mastah," Guy repeated.

"Youah bein' tested, too," Hunnicutt told him.

"Guy happy to be tes', Mastah Lee," said the fighter. "Guy proud to be picked out foh tes'in', Mastah!"

Hunnicutt looked at the big black keenly, then nodded.

"Give Guy a rifle," he told Gore. "Then unchain the bucks so's they kin move free an' easy. Mistah Lahkin, suh . . . an' Mistah Gore . . . both you an' myse'f'll keep ouah rifles on 'em. Guy, you keep youah rifle on these bucks too . . . an' nevah foahgit theah's three white men with rifles on you."

"Yas, suh . . . yas suh Mastah," nodded Guy, proudly grasping his rifle and turning it on his fellows as the overseer unchained them.

When the task was finished, Hunnicutt said, "Now, Mistah Gore—will you have one of the bucks, Homah, to git Royal out of that box? If you please. An' Guy, Mistah Lahkin, Mistah Gore . . ." he looked from the great armed fighter to his friend, to the overseer, "if it becomes necessary to shoot at this runnah slave at any time aftah he comes out of that box, remembah, the privilege to shoot him is mine an' mine alone!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The gathering watched as the designated buck pried up and removed the lid of the box. Slowly, the great Mandingo inside came to a sitting position. He turned his head ponderously from side to side, then, with some difficulty, seemed to focus on the staring, unmoving slaves. He seemed to be unaware of the rifles the white men and Guy held on him.

"Good . . . he's still groggy!" exclaimed Hunnicutt. "That makes him possible to han'le. The minute he kin stan' on his legs an' walk, we takin' him into the stable an' chainin' him by one ankle to a post."

Even as he finished speaking, the tremendous buck gripped the sides of the box and pushed to his feet. The men with the rifles closed in a bit. Now Royal lifted one great foot and stepped over the edge of the box onto the ground, brought his other foot over. He stood focusing his eyes first on the general surroundings, then on the white men and finally on the master. Not a hint of expression touched his broad brown face.

"Know wheah you are?" Hunnicutt demanded. "Know youah back at Hunnicutt Hill? Ansawah me, nigra!"

Slowly, his tongue thick from the drug, Royal spoke. "Yes, Mastah. I know."

"Do you know what's goin' to happen to you . . . aftah all the white people you've killed? Aftah the way you ran away and then came back to stir up an insuhrection ag'in youah own mastah? Do you know . . . or don' you?"

The six-foot-seven Mandingo stared stolidly back at Hunnicutt, whether through drug-wittedness or defiance, not apparent.

"You defyin' me, nigra?"

Royal shook his head. Just once. "No, Mastah," he said, his voice a little less slow. "I jus' don' know what to say, Mastah. I know youah going to punish me because you are the mastah and the mastah punishes the slave foah what he's done. But I don't know what you are going to do, suh."

"See?" Hunnicutt cried to Larkin in angry triumph. "See how defiant he is? Did you heah how he talks back to me . . . a white man . . . his white mastah . . . his wronged mastah? See how he's bold enough to look me in the face, the way no propah slave evah looks into his mastah's face?"

He waited for Larkin's nod, then continued, his excitement and angry sense of justification mounting. "Indeed I am goin' to punish you, my fine buck!" he cried. "I'm goin' to punish you twice—the secon' an' final step bein' youah final an' ultimate punishmint!"

He ran his look over Royal's magnificent frame. Anew he noted the powerful muscles, evaluated the superb strength of this buck. He recalled Royal's prowess with the wenches he had covered at the master's order, under the master's watchful eye.

Now, as always when he punished a slave, Hunnicutt's desire burned. Only this time he was plagued also by the humiliation of his spilled sap and by his need this morning for the whore's comforting mouth. What he wanted now and must have was woman. And by the time he got this insurrectionist, this murdering black animal launched into his punishment, that was exactly one of the benefits that he, the master, would be reaping.

He issued his orders, designating errands, tasks and preparations. Then, impatiently, he waited while they were carried out. The captured buck, he observed, though he walked in his great, long stride to the stable at rifle point, and though he was still a bit groggy, was watchful, ready to break and run if given the least chance.

Fifteen minutes later Hunnicutt surveyed the setup inside the stable with satisfaction. Royal stood naked in

the center of the carriage-way, a length of heavy chain fastened to one ankle, the other end of which was locked around a post. His great sex organ, rooted in its black wool, projected so large it seemed ever tumescent. In front of Royal but against the outer wall of the stable, the nine selected bucks, all of them now naked too, crouched on their haunches facing him. Guy stood at the end of the line, his mammoth body nude and stark with strength, the rifle ready.

Hunnicutt and Luther Larkin, fully clad and with rifles in hand, waited a few feet from Royal, gazing past him toward the open double doorway. Three additional bucks, all naked, lugging violin, crude drum and battered horn, came into the stable. At a wave of the master's hand, they arranged themselves near the nine crouching blacks.

"Play!" Hunnicutt commanded. "Play somethin' bright an' fast!"

A lilting tune sprang up and grew. There was the bright horn, the singing violin, the throbbing drum. Hunnicutt felt the throb go through him, felt it ride his blood and beat at his center, pulsing in his roused and growing passion.

The nine nude bucks swayed to the music, just a bit because of the pointing rifles, but they swayed. The music brightened, sang, beat.

"Now, Gore!" Hunnicutt shouted. "Bring 'em in!"

Immediately there came dancing through the doorway, moving, swaying, leaping to the singing beat of the music, six naked, nubile wenches. All were wearing bright tignons to cover their hair. Into the shadowy stable they danced, Gore, who was fully clothed, following with his rifle, and then down the long reach of puncheon floor, dancing still.

A few paces from Royal, they halted in line before him and danced. Their nude, lovely hips swayed in smooth, slow brightness—one sway to two fast, bright beats. Their breasts moved, swayed, lifted with their movement and with the lifting of their shapely arms.

Hunnicut's passion humped his trousers.

His eyes went to Royal. The buck was staring at the nude, dancing wenches, watching their every move. His great organ was standing at right angles to his flat, mahogany colored belly.

"Sol" Hunnicutt cried, his voice cutting through the music. "You like youah private floah show, don' you? You see, my fine buck," he continued sarcastically, "youah mastah has no doubt that you went to New Orleans foah the bright lights and the women, havin' cultivated the taste foah them when you stayed in the whoahhouse an entiah month."

The music went faster, brighter. Royal's eyes turned to Hunnicutt. He was waiting for the master to speak further.

A great satisfaction went through Hunnicutt, at the same time building his desire. "Unfohtunately," he continued, "that mastah who undahstan's youah ridiculous, fancied needs, wants youah presence at Hunnicutt Hill. Howevah, he is goin' to provide you with what you are missin' by not bein' in New Orleans . . . as you kin see. Not as a favah to you . . . but as the commencemint of youah punishmint!"

He gestured to the orchestra. "Softah . . . slowah!"

The players did his bidding.

"Lay down flat on youah back," he ordered Royal.

Eyes smouldering, the great buck complied. He lay with arms outstretched, legs apart, that tremendous penis erect. Hunnicutt took a leisurely look around at all the naked bucks. They crouched along the wall, hands on their jutting organs, thick lips hanging open. Guy, standing guard, was in misery, his sex turgid and twitching. Even the white men had humps, all of which excited Hunnicutt still more.

Taking his time, passing pulsing with the music, Hunnicutt looked at the nude, dancing wenches. His attention kept going back to a tall one with provocative, swaying oval hips, who kept rolling her glance at him and smiling as she danced.

"You . . . Ginny," he called to her, "dance ovah heah . . . don' miss a beat of that music . . . come steppin' an' swayin', with them tits a-swingin' . . . don't let anythin' lose a beat!"

Knowing that Larkin and Gore were watching, and not caring, Hunnicutt took off his trousers and underpants as the wench came dancing over. His manhood stood out as rigidly as that of Royal, though not as big. As the wench reached him, he put out his hands and held her by the breasts as she danced and by the breasts he pulled her to a stop as he would rein in a horse.

The music went on; the other wenches danced on.

"See that petah on that buck Royal?" he asked Ginny.

Her brown eyes rolled. She smiled. "Yas, Mastah . . . Ginny seein'."

"He evah covah you?" Hunnicutt prodded.

She nodded, giggled nervously. "De mastah hese'f watched," she replied. "Royal done covahed Ginny . . . long time ago, an' Ginny done drop a great big buck suckah f'um his covahin', Mastah suhl!"

"Well, since he's covahed you, now I wan' you to covah him. Open youahse'f an' covah that great, big, reachin' quiverin' petah . . . bounce up an' down on it to the music. Le's see what a wench like you kin do' 'bout a big petah like that one, all by youahse'f!"

Giggling but eager, moving to the music, the wench straddled Royal's upper legs and lowered her dark shaft over his reaching penis. With a little squeal, she slid down onto it and began to bounce. Instantly Royal bucked, slamming her upward so violently he all but sent her flying off. She squealed and bounced back onto him with gusto, never missing a beat of the music. Fiercer and faster Royal went, his big face tense and expressionless. Faster Ginny bounced; harder Royal bucked.

Just as the cords in the stud's neck stood out, just as he was about to spend, Hunnicutt grabbed the wench by the shoulders. With one yank he had her off the buck and on her back, right beside Royal.

One thrust and he was into the wench and pumping.

After only two pumps, he was exultantly discharging into her, the achievement whetted by Royal's unslaked desire. Two rolling waves of ecstasy took him on two beats of the music and he swore under his breath.

Further satisfaction came when he withdrew and saw the turgid, heaving state of Royal's manhood.

"Luthah," he said gallantly to Larkin, "I beg youah pahdon foah bein' rude an' satisfyin' myse'f fu'st. Will you do me the honah of suhvicin' the nex' wench . . . aftah I take huh away fum this runnah at the crucial moment?"

"Thank you kindly, Lee," Larkin said, "but not today."

"Gore?"

The overseer indicated his rifle. "Reckon I'll keep my mind on the shootin' piece. Thank ye, anyhow."

Hunnicutt looked at Guy. The big fighter was obviously struggling to keep from grabbing at his jerking organ. He looked next at the bucks; they were groaning and all of them were miserably holding themselves.

"Aftah the punishmint," Hunnicutt told the blacks, "if you he'p me cahhy it off propah, I'll see that each an' ev'ry one of you gits one of these wenches."

They all nodded and grinned and held themselves.

Again Hunnicutt selected a dancing wench. This one was a small, extremely curvaceous mulatress with a pert little snub nose which she carried high because it was so unusual in a Negress as to be a treasure. Her curved little buttocks were as pert and carried as proudly, as was her mound.

"'Phelia," Hunnicutt called, "come git undah this buck. Le's see if you kin hump it with him as good as you done when he fu'st come to Hunnicutt Hill!"

She came at a running dance. She flung herself to the puncheons and threw her pretty legs apart even as Royal mounted. They moved in time to the music. Soon they went harder than the beat and the music had to go faster and faster to keep up with them.

Hunnicutt felt the hump leap in his trousers. Just as

Royal's neck corded, he snatched up a knife with a long, sharp blade and drove it into the buck's upper arm and pushed sidewise, forcing him off the wench. He yanked the knife out and grinned, watching blood spurt, watching Royal's throbbing, jerking, unsatisfied organ, feeling the throb and jerk of his own, knowing that in a moment he would satiate it.

"Wheah'd you hide my gol'?" he demanded of Royal. "Tell me . . . or you wan' me to stab you in the petah, to?"

Royal closed his eyes. His giant frame tightened. Slowly, his organ quieted but remained swollen. His arm bled. He did not speak.

"Ah!" gloated Hunnicutt. "Stubbohn, eh?"

The music beat on. Wild with desire, he mounted Phelia and aimed for his relief. But again, as had happened with the whore in the hotel, he found himself suddenly impotent.

"Hell an' damnation!" he yelled, springing to his feet. "The res' of you wenches come ovah heah . . . keep the music goin', you bucks! Three of you wenches dance 'roun' this buck, an' three of you play with him . . . drive him crazy!"

One of the wenches dropped down and suckled Royal's nipples; the second stroked his inner legs, tickling him from knee to crotch; the third stroked and kissed and suckled his manhood. The remaining wenches danced and hovered over the grouping on the puncheons.

Hunnicutt watched avidly, his own passion whetted anew. He waited for the instant of Royal's almost-release. The music throbbed on. The crouching, watching, slaving bucks moaned with everything.

Hunnicutt himself, now so wild for wench that he could not wait, pounced just as Royal was ready to explode into the suckling wench's mouth. He threw her to the puncheons and again tried to enter, and again could not.

It didn't matter to him that two other white men were

looking on. He was mad with desire, frustration, rage, hatred, lust for revenge. Because he could not enter the wench, he slapped and cursed her.

Again he gave Royal a fresh wench. Again he seized her at the last second, again failed to satisfy himself.

Royal cried loudly, "What's the mattah, Mastah? Can't you be a man? Can't you let youah manhood out? Like this—look, Mastah—I've got a knife-wound in my arm that you put theah—but I can let my manhood out—watch!"

Hunnicutt stared as the hated black deliberately expressed his seed upon the puncheons, then grabbed a wench, pulled her down and entered. He pumped twice and shouted in triumph as she cried out in delight.

"Twice, Mastah!" shouted Royal defiantly. "Twice I was a man . . . within two heartbeats I was a man!"

"You wan' a contest?" yelled Hunnicutt, his organ all but bobbing in time to the music. "I'm a white man, undahstan'? An' you ain' but a Nigra . . . a black . . . jus' a cut highah than an animal in my fiel's! But I kin outpestah you any day in the yeah! Twice today I've pestahed . . . an' I kin pestah twice moah . . . or fohty times . . . an' I'm goin' to take the time to prove that to you befoah I proceed with the next step of youah punishmint!"

By this time he was standing, feet apart, organ throbbing miserably. "Gore," he ordered, "go to the house an' fetch Princess! Have huh nekkid! This buck an' his mastah is goin' to have a duel . . . a duel of pestahin'!"

CHAPTER THIRTY

Royal rolled, grabbing for Hunnicutt's ankles, but the master drew back his foot and booted him mercilessly in the groin. He watched the black go quiet, observing that he endured pain as the Mandingos were said to endure. The big buck gave no sign by face or sound, not even by so much as a twitch of the finger that he felt any pain whatsoever. Also, despite the agony he must feel, he remained semi-tumescent.

Gore was hastening out of the stable. The bucks were very quiet. Larkin was regarding Hunnicutt steadily.

The orchestra played endlessly on, the beat thrumming without letup in Hunnicutt's manhood. The wenches, not knowing what else to do, kept dancing between the orchestra and the spot where Hunnicutt stood over Royal.

At last Gore returned with the naked Princess. Hunnicutt watched them approach.

"Stan' up, Royal," he ordered. "Ouah duel is fixin' to commence. Youah Princess is enterin'. You claim youah both royalty—treat huh like royalty!"

Soundlessly the six-foot-seven Mandingo got to his feet. He towered above his master and Hunnicutt was far from being a small man.

Hunnicutt felt his desire deepen, become more unbearable than ever before. This wench was more beautiful than any. Why hadn't he noticed? Why hadn't he taken her for his own? Well, that could be remedied.

He eyed her as she came nearer. Her skin was smooth and softly tan, for she was half white. Her eyes were green and gleaming, her features lovely. Her auburn hair fell free to her shoulders. Hunnicutt noted that there was

no kink to that hair, only a deep, wide wave. She had great, pure, high breasts, a waist that swept in and thighs that surged out, forming a cradle for her tempting mound.

"Come heah, wench," he told her. "Stan' befoah me . . . stan' befoah youah mastah."

She did as he said, casting one long, tender glance at Royal. Then she stood before Hunnicutt, meeting his eyes as no slave should ever do, for it is a boldness, a familiarity. He had not missed her long love-look at the buck, nor had he missed how it brought Royal, despite his aching groin, to full readiness.

Royal treasured that readiness. He believed that Hunnicutt would follow the same procedure as with the other wenches. He would have Royal enter Princess, wait until he was about to finish, then snatch her away for himself. This would fit the 'duel' idea he had announced.

Royal determined to empty his seed into Princess the instant Hunnicutt had her either to cover his organ or him to enter her. He would empty without movement. He had a double purpose—to bestow love upon his beloved once more and to put additional seed into her to insure himself, on the verge of death, a son.

Hunnicutt, however, now changed the procedure. "Lay down," he ordered Princess. "I'm gittin' fu'st try . . . I don' know that I'm goin' to give my duelin' buck a tuhn at you."

Scarcely able to hold himself from attacking the master, from killing him here and now before a rifle could stop him, Royal watched his beloved stretch out on the floor. Hunnicutt knelt, straddling her.

Royal instinctively tensed to lunge; Gore's rifle prodded him between the shoulders, remained.

Hunnicutt aimed his swollen organ, plunged, failed, plunged. The music beat harder, it semed, on every failure, harder still on the plunge, again harder on the failure. The rifle bored against Royal's back; his tense muscles began to ache as he lay on the floor.

The master got to his feet, breathing hard. He looked angrier than Royal had ever seen him. His voice was loud and uneven. "I bin showin' you how I kin control myse'f," he declared. "Now . . . le's see if you kin do as well . . . le's see if you kin git as close as I kin to the honey-pot an' still resist it!"

Royal got to his knees and moved over to Princess, who still lay ready. He straddled her and entered. He felt her sheath close upon him, felt it grip and loosen, grip and loosen, as if she sensed his plan and was enabling him to carry it through. Ever so secretly he knew she was tensing her buttocks and pushing almost motionless up . . . down . . . up, even as she tensed and loosened the wonderful, hot, moist walls of her womanhood. Without one motion on his part, he felt his hot and boiling seed roll into her, roll and roll, deep and deep, carrying the life of his son, of all his sons and grandsons and their grandsons.

He felt the master grab his shoulders, pull him and shove him violently aside. Thus he lost the very last of his seed but it did not matter. He had succeeded. He let himself be pushed off Princess and watched the master, who was like a madman, his manhood now dripping sap.

Suddenly the master bestrode Princess and took aim. Mightily Royal swung up one fist, brought it crashing down upon the master's head.

"No!" Royal cried. "Not youah seed in my Princess!"

Hunnicut, who had been knocked to the other side of the prone wench and thus out of Royal's reach, got up and crouched. He shook his head to clear it, scooped up the knife with which he had stabbed Royal in the arm and danced toward the big buck, who was dancing and ready and waiting at the end of his chain.

Larkin moved as if to come to Hunnicutt's side.

"Stay out of it, Luthahl!" Hunnicutt cried. "This's my duel to the end! Stay back!"

The bucks against the wall made no sound. Larkin and Gore and Guy held their rifles and were silent. The can-

ing wenches clutched each other and stared. Princess went to them and they drew her to them. The music beat on.

Hunnicutt hurled himself at Royal, knife ready. As he lanced the blade at the giant stud's belly, Royal grabbed him into his iron-hard arms and squeezed. The blade missed its mark and went glancing along one mahogany-colored thigh, opening a long, deep cut. In the instant that the blade ripped his flesh, the big slave relaxed his hold ever so slightly, and with a strong wrench Hunnicutt was free. He danced backward, knife upraised.

Royal, eyes on that murderous blade, waited, knees bent, arms ready. He could feel pain in his slashed thigh now, could feel the blood running freely and warmly down his leg but still he did not go for the white man.

The only reason he had attacked the master before was to keep him from violating Princess, to keep him from pumping his white-man seed into her, who was filled with Royal's seed. He watched the master's lithe, strong body, watched that distorted face and knew he had never before seen such hatred. He watched the knife.

The master danced and fainted; Royal kept his bent-kneed stance, fists up, turning so that always he faced the killer-master. Suddenly Hunnicutt darted in, knife going for Royal's privates. Royal thrust his great arms into the air, brought them down, seized the white man and held him. Though Hunnicutt wrenched and kicked and gouged with his knees, Royal wrapped one relentless arm around his neck and with the other hand wrested the knife out of the master's grasp.

He turned the blade on Hunnicutt. He drove for the heart, but a rifle cracked, there was a dull impact in his back, and his knife-arm went numb so that the blade merely grazed the white man's upper arm.

"Don' kill him!" yelled Hunnicutt. "He's mine!"

Lightning fast, the master grabbed the knife from Royal and drove it into his chest. He pulled it free. Royal

fell back a step and, as he recovered his stance and drove brutally at the master, the white man plunged the blade into his chest again.

Even as he kept plunging toward the master, Royal felt his knees bend and weaken and fold, felt the puncheon floor come up against his stabbed and bleeding chest, press against it and drink his blood. Exerting his stunned and curiously draining strength, he rolled to his back and, as the master dived upon him still again with the blade, got one hand on the knife-wrist and the other on the hated white throat.

There was movement from the white men, but Hunnicutt gasped, "No . . . stay back . . ." twisted his body unexpectedly and with remarkable strength, breaking Royal's hold on his neck but not on his wrist. Now the master grabbed Royal's free hand when it came again at his throat, and sank his teeth into the strong, wrenching wrist and held on. Like that, Royal clamping the master's knife-wrist and the master keeping his teeth sunk into Royal's free wrist, they rolled and struggled and panted and fought.

Royal could feel the chain on his ankle hold him back. He could feel his wounds open and gush—the gunshot wound in his back, the knife stabs in his chest, the slash in his thigh and in his leg. He could feel his life spurt out on the blood, could feel his life hit the floor and go soaking into the uncaring puncheons. Still struggling, eyes closed to hoard strength, he could hear the master's voice, could feel hands on him—other hands—many hands.

"Throw him in the swamp to die," he heard Hunnicutt tell the hands. He heard a soft cry from Princess and managed to open his eyes once, heavily. Before they fell shut again, beyond his control, he got one flash of his beloved. She was being forcibly held from him by the white overseer, and she was crying his name: "Royal . . . Royal!" Just as his eyelids finally closed, he saw the mistress. Frances Hunnicutt nodded at him, eyes luminous, and he knew that she was promising him she would get

Princess away from Hunnicutt Hill, that she would send Princess home to Africa.

"No," he heard the master say now, his voice sounding fainter than before, "don' throw him in the swamp. I've got a bettah death foah this slave, this killah slave. Mistah Gore, take a couple them bucks an' have them git me a rattlah . . . a small rattlah. Have the rattlah alive an' ready an' filled with all his venom. I got a puhpose, a real fahwell foah this nigra . . . somethin' the Vikings themse'ves used!"

Royal heard the other white man's voice, heard the mistress' voice as if from far away and protesting but it seemed the master's voice went on an' on, as though he did not hear them. "Chain this nigra," the master's voice was saying, "chain him fas' an' tight . . . an' do it in a hurry . . . I don' wan' him dyin' on me befoah I git my full satisfaction like the Vikings done!"

Royal felt the chains come onto his body and he struggled. But many hands held him down, held him still, and the bleeding lulled him, though he struggled on . . . and on . . . and the master cursed and marveled and cursed again at his unbelievable endurance and lasting strength.

Royal felt his blood, hot and smooth, run endlessly down his chest, down his belly, his legs. He felt his life ebb on the blood and struggled anew.

He felt himself lifted by many hands, struggling. He felt himself carried, still struggling. It began to feel like actually he was floating through the air . . . or maybe it was his head that floated.

Sometimes . . . moments . . . years . . . and he heard the faraway voice of the master say, "Lay him down." And he felt the cool wet swamp mud under him, and the master was saying, "Plastah mud in his wounds all of 'em . . . I don' wan' him to die fum any one of those wounds. I got othah plans . . . you got that rattlah ready?"

With the dregs of his strength, Royal arched his body up from swamp mud, chains and all, and the many hands bore him down and held him. And while hands

held him, other hands poked and patted at his wounds, and the cool and healing mud entered them and mixed with his ebbing blood and staunched it. Again he arched his body, and again he was borne down and held to the swamp by chains and by living bonds of sweating, panting, naked Negro slaves like himself. And though he arched again and still again, there was too much bearing down, and there was not enough pulsing blood left for him to shake them off.

"Give me the rattlah," he heard Hunnicutt's voice order so far away it was a whisper only. "Cahful now . . . so's he don' bite me."

"Mastahl" Royal heard a slave say ever so faintly, "That rattlah kill you, Mastahl"

"It ain' me the rattlah goin' to kill," he heard the far-away master declare. "Now . . . I got it. Open Royal's mouth . . . open it wide . . . widah . . . fah as it'll go."

"Lee," Royal heard, this voice fainter than all others, just a whisper to his ears, a breath. "Foah God's sake, what you goin' to do?"

Royal could feel his mouth being forced open, though he held his teeth clamped as long as he could. The many hands forced a stick between his teeth, stretched at his mouth, widened it, held. Once he bit a finger but in the end his mouth was propped open.

"I'm goin' to put this rattlah down this nigra's throat . . . clean down . . ." Hunnicutt replied, his breath hitting Royal's face, but his voice wellnigh beyond hearing. "I'm goin' to crawl this rattlah down his gullet . . . an' he'll bite this Nigra's vitals an' kill him. An' moah than that, he'll eat his way out an' come out of the Nigra's stinkin' side. That's what the Vikings done, an' that's what I'm doin'."

As he began to sink into spinning, dizzy blackness, mouth propped wide but no snake in it, not yet, Royal heard a whisper of anguished cry from the master and he wondered: Where is the rattler . . . why doesn't it crawl into me . . . why doesn't . . . ?

And all the hands let go of Royal and the master's voice was dying away beyond a whisper, crying out to God in heaven above and demanding that others save him. And this was the last thing Royal heard as he drowned in the spinning, soundless blackness.